



SHORT FICTION

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RIYA'S FOUNDLING

The loft of the feed-house, with its stacked grainsacks, was a B-72, a fort, a foxhole—any number of things, depending on Phildee's moods.

Today it was a jumping-off place.

Phildee slipped out of his dormitory and ran across the yard to the feed-house. He dropped the big wooden latch behind him, and climbed up the ladder to the loft, depending on the slight strength of his young arms more than on his legs, which had to be lifted to straining heights before they could negotiate the man-sized rungs.

He reached the loft and stood panting, looking out over the farm through the loft door, at the light wooden fences around it, and the circling antenna of the radar tower.

Usually, he spent at least a little time each day crouched behind the grainsacks and being bigger and older, firing coolly and accurately into charging companies of burly, thick-lipped U.E.S. soldiers, or going over on one wing and whistling down on a flight of TT-34's that scattered like frightened ducks before the fiery sleet of his wing rockets.

But today was different, today there was something he wanted to try.

He stood up on his toes and searched. He felt the touch of Miss Cowan's mind, no different from that of anyone else—flat, unsystematic.

He sighed. Perhaps, somewhere, there was someone else like himself. For a moment, the fright of loneliness invaded him, but then faded. He took a last look at the farm, then

moved away from the open door, letting his mind slip into another way of thinking.

His chubby features twisted into a scowl of concentration as he visualized reality. The scowl became a deeper grimace as he negated that reality, step by step, and substituted another.

F is for Phildee.

O is for Out.

R is for Reimann.

T is for Topology.

H is for heartsick hunger.

Abruptly, the Reimann fold became a concrete visualization. As though printed clearly in and around the air, which was simultaneously both around him and not around him, which existed/not existed in spacetime, he saw the sideslip diagram.

He twisted.

Spring had come to Riya's world; spring and the thousand sounds of it. The melted snow in the mountaintops ran down in trceries of leaping water, and the spring-crests raced along the creeks into the rivers. The riverbank grasses sprang into life; the plains turned green again.

Riya made her way up the path across the foothills, conscious of her shame. The green plain below her was dotted, two by two, with the figures of her people. It was spring, and Time. Only she was alone.

There was a special significance in the fact that she was here on this path in this season. The plains on either side of the brown river were her people's territory. During the summer, the couples ranged over the grass until the dams were ready to drop their calves. Then it became the bulls'

duty to forage for their entire families until the youngsters were able to travel south to the winter range.

Through the space of years, the people had increased in numbers, the pressure of this steady growth making itself felt as the yearlings filled out on the winter range. It had become usual, as the slow drift northward was made toward the end of winter, for some of the people to split away from the main body and range beyond the gray mountains that marked the western limits of the old territories. Since these wanderers were usually the most willful and headstrong, they were regarded as quasi-outcasts by the more settled people of the old range.

But—and here Riya felt the shame pierce more strongly than ever—they had their uses, occasionally. Preoccupied in her shame, she involuntarily turned her head downward, anxious that none of the people be staring derisively upward at the shaggy brown hump of fur that was she, toiling up the path.

She was not the first—but that was meaningless. That other female people had been ugly or old, that the same unforgotten force that urged her up the mountain path had brought others here before her, meant only that she was incapable of accepting the verdict of the years that had thinned her pelt, dimmed her eyes, and broken the smooth rhythm of her gait.

In short, it meant that Riya Sair, granddam times over, spurned by every male on the old range, was willing to cross the gray mountains and risk death from the resentful wild dams for the thin hope that there was a male among the wildlings who would sire her calf.

She turned her head back to the path and hurried on, cringing in inward self-reproach at her speed.

Except for her age, Riya presented a perfect average of her people. She stood two yards high and two wide at the shoulders, a yard at the haunches, and measured three and a half yards from her muzzle to the rudimentary tail. Her

legs were short and stumpy, cloven-hooved. Her massive head hung slightly lower than her shoulders, and could be lowered to within an inch or two of the ground. She was herbivorous, ruminant, and mammalian. Moreover, she had intelligence—not of a very high order, but adequate for her needs.

From a Terrestrial point of view, none of this was remarkable. Many years of evolution had gone into her fashioning—more years for her one species than for all the varieties of man that have ever been. Nevertheless, she did have some remarkable attributes.

It was one of these attributes that now enabled her to sense what happened on the path ahead of her. She stopped still, only her long fur moving in the breeze.

Phildee—five, towheaded, round faced, chubby, dressed in a slightly grubby corduroy oversuit, and precocious—had his attributes, too. Grubby and tousled; branded with a thread of licorice from one corner of his mouth to his chin; involved in the loss of his first milk-tooth, as he was—he nevertheless slipped onto the path on Riya's world, the highest product of Terrestrial evolution. Alice followed a white rabbit down a hole. Phildee followed Reimann down into a hole that, at the same time, followed him, and emerged—where?

Phildee didn't know. He could have performed the calculation necessary to the task almost instantly, but he was five. It was too much trouble.

He looked up, and saw a gray slope of rock vaulting above him. He looked down, and saw it fall away toward a plain on which were scattered pairs of foraging animals. He felt a warm breeze, smelled it, saw it blow dust along the path, and saw Riya:

B is for big brown beast.

L is for looming large, looking lonely.

B? L? Bull? No—bison.

Bison: bison (bi'sn) *n.* The buffalo of the N. Amer. plains.

Phildee shook his head and scowled. No—not bison, either. What, then? He probed.

Riya took a step forward. The sight of a living organism other than a person was completely unfamiliar to her. Nevertheless, anything that small, and undeniably covered—in most areas, at least—with some kind of fur, could not, logically, be anything but a strange kind of calf. But—she stopped, and raised her head—if a calf, then where was the call?

Phildee's probe swept past the laboring mind directly into her telepathic, instinctual centers.

Voiceless, with their environment so favorable that it had never been necessary for them to develop prehensile limbs, female people had nevertheless evolved a method of child care commensurate with their comparatively higher intelligence.

Soft as tender fingers, gentle as the human hand that smooths the awry hair back from the young forehead, Riya's mental caress enfolded Phildee.

Phildee recoiled. The feeling was:

Warm

Soft } Not candy in the mouth

Sweet

Familiar

Candy in the mouth { Good
Tasty

Nice

The feeling was { Not Familiar

Not Good

*Not Tasty
Not Nice*

WHY?:

M is for many motionless months.

T is for tense temper tantrums.

R is for rabid—No!—rapid rolling wrench.

M.T.R. Mother.

Phildee's mother wanted Phildee's father. Phildee's mother wanted green grass and apple trees, tight skirts and fur jackets on Fifth Avenue, men to turn and look, a little room where nobody could see her. Phildee's mother had radiation burns. Phildee's mother was dead.

He wavered; physically. Maintaining his position in this world was a process that demanded constant attention from the segment of his mind devoted to it. For a moment, even that small group of brain cells almost became involved in his reaction.

It was that which snapped him back into functioning logically. M.T.R. was Mother. Mother was:

Tall

*Thin } "In Heaven's name, Doctor, when will this thing
White be over?"*

Biped

B.L. was Riya. Riya was:

Big brown beast, looming large, looking lonely.

B.L.=M.T.R.

Equation not meaningful, not valid.

Almost resolved, only a few traces of the initial conflict remained. Phildee put the tips of his right fingers to his mouth. He dug his toe into the ground, gouged a semicircular furrow, and smoothed it over with his sole.

Riya continued to look at him from where she was standing, two or three feet away. Haltingly, she reached out her mind again—hesitating not because of fear of another such reaction on Phildee’s part, for that had been far beyond her capacity to understand, but because even the slightest rebuff on the part of a child to a gesture as instinctive as a Terrestrial mother’s caress was something that none of the people had ever encountered before.

While her left-behind intellectual capacity still struggled to reconcile the feel of childhood with a visual image of complete unfamiliarity, the warm mind-caress went gently forth again.

Phildee made up his mind. Ordinarily, he was immune to the small emotional problems that beclouded less rational intellects. He was unused to functioning in other than a cause/effect universe. Mothers were usually—though sometimes not—matronly women who spent the greater part of roughly twenty years per child in conscious preoccupation with, and/or subconscious or conscious rejection of, their offspring.

In his special case, Mother was a warm place, a frantic, hysteric voice, the pressure of the spasmodically contractile musculature linked to her hyperthyroid metabolism. Mother was a thing from before birth.

Riya—Riya bore a strong resemblance to an intelligent cow. In any physiological sense, she could no more be his mother than—

The second caress found him not unaccustomed to it. It enfolded his consciousness, tenderly, protectingly, empathetic.

Phildee gave way to instinct.

The fur along the ridge of Riya's spine prickled with a well-remembered happiness as she felt the hesitant answering surge in Phildee's mind. Moving surely forward, she nuzzled his face. Phildee grinned. He ran his fingers through the thick fur at the base of her short neck.

Big warm wall of brown fur.

Cool, happy nose.

Happy, happy, eyes.

Great joy welled up in Riya. No shameful trot across the mountains faced her now. No hesitant approach to the huddled, suspicious wildlings was before her. The danger of sharp female hooves to be avoided, of skulking at the edge of the herd in hope of an anxious male, was a thing no longer to be half-fearfully approached.

With a nudge of her head, she directed Phildee down the path to the old range while she herself turned around. She stood motionless for a sweeping scan of the plain below her. The couples were scattered over the grass—but couples only, the females as yet unfulfilled.

This, too, was another joy to add to the greatest of all. So many things about her calf were incomprehensible—the only dimly-felt overtones of projected symbology that accompanied Phildee's emotional reactions, the alien structure—so many, many things. Her mind floundered vainly through the complex data.

But all that was nothing. What did it matter? The Time had been, and for another season, she was a dam.

Phildee walked beside her down the path, one fist wrapped in the fur of her flank, short legs windmilling.

They reached the plain, and Riya struck out across it toward the greatest concentration of people, her head proudly raised. She stopped once, and deliberately cropped

a mouthful of grass with unconcern, but resumed her pace immediately thereafter.

With the same unconcern, she nudged Phildee into the center of the group of people, and, ignoring them, began teaching her calf to feed.

Eat. (Picture of Phildee/calf on all fours, cropping the plains grass.)

Phildee stared at her in puzzlement. Grass was not food. He sent the data emphatically.

Riya felt the tenuous discontent. She replied with tender understanding. Sometimes the calf was hesitant.

Eat. (Gently, understandingly, but firmly. [Repetition of picture.]) She bent her head and pushed him carefully over, then held his head down with a gentle pressure of her muzzle. *Eat.*

Phildee squirmed. He slipped out from under her nose and regained his feet. He looked at the other people, who were staring in puzzlement at Riya and himself.

He felt himself pushed forward again. *Eat.*

Abruptly, he realized the situation. In a culture of herbivores, what food could there be but herbage? There would be milk, in time, but not for—he probed—months.

In probing, too, he found the visualization of his life with her ready at the surface of Riya's mind.

There was no shelter on the plain. His fur was all the shelter necessary.

But I don't have any fur.

In the fall, they would move to the southern range.

Walk? A thousand miles?

He would grow big and strong. In a year, he would be a sire himself.

His reaction was simple, and practiced. He adjusted his reality concept to Reimannian topology. Not actually, but

subjectively, he felt himself beginning to slip Earthward.

Riya stiffened in alarm. The calf was straying. The knowledge was relayed from her mother-centers to the telepathic functions.

Stop. You cannot go there. You must be with your mother. You are not grown. Stop. Stay with me. I will protect you. I love you.

The universe shuddered. Phildee adjusted frantically. Cutting through the delicately maintained reality concept was a scrambling, jamming frequency of thought. In terror, he flung himself backward into Riya's world. Standing completely still, he probed frantically into Riya's mind.

And found her mind only fumblingly beginning to intellectualize the simple formulization of what her instinctive centers had computed, systematized, and activated before her conscious mind had even begun to doubt that everything was well.

His mind accepted the data, and computed.

Handless and voiceless, not so fast afoot in their bulkiness as the weakest month-old calf, the people had long ago evolved the restraints necessary for rearing their children.

If the calf romped and ran, his mother ran beside him, and the calf was not permitted to run faster than she. If a calf strayed from its sleeping mother, it strayed only so far, and then the mother woke—but the calf had already long been held back by the time her intelligence awoke to the straying.

The knowledge and computations were fed in Phildee's rational centers. The Universe—and Earth—were closed to him. He must remain here.

But human children could not survive in this environment. He had to find a solution—instantly.

He clinched his fists, feeling his arm muscles quiver.

His lower lip was pulled into his mouth, and his teeth sank in.

The diagram—the pattern—bigger—stronger—try—try—this is not real—*this* is real: brown earth, white clouds, blue sky—try—mouth full of warm salt...

F is for Phildee!

O is for Out!

R is for Riya!

T is for Topology!

H is for happiness and home!

Riya shook herself. She stood in the furrows of a plowed field, her eyes vacant with bewilderment. She stared uncomprehendingly at the walls and the radar tower, the concrete shoulders of the air raid bunkers. She saw anti-aircraft quick-firers being hastily cranked around and down at her, heard Phildee's shout that saved her life, and understood none of it.

But none of it mattered. Her strange calf was with her, standing beside her with his fingers locked in her fur, and she could feel the warm response in his mind as she touched him with her caress again.

She saw the other little calves erupting out of the low dormitory buildings, and something within her crooned.

Riya nuzzled her foundling. She looked about her at the War Orphans' Relocation Farm with her happy, happy eyes.

DESIRE NO MORE

"Desire no more than to thy lot may fall...."

CHAUCER

The small young man looked at his father, and shook his head.

"But you've *got* to learn a trade," his father said, exasperated. "I can't afford to send you to college; you know that."

"I've got a trade," he answered.

His father smiled thinly. "What?" he asked patronizingly.

"I'm a rocket pilot," the boy said, his thin jaw stretching the skin of his cheeks.

His father laughed in the way the boy had learned to anticipate and hate. "Yeah," he said. He leaned back in his chair and laughed so hard that the Sunday paper slipped off his wide lap and fell to the floor with an unnoticed stiff rustle.

"A *rocket* pilot!" His father's derision hooted through the quiet parlor. "A ro—*oh, no!*—a rocket *pilot!*"

The boy stared silently at the convulsed figure in the chair. His lips fell into a set white bar, and the corners of his jaws bulged with the tension in their muscles. Suddenly, he turned on his heel and stalked out of the parlor, through the hall, out the front door, to the porch. He stopped there, hesitating a little.

"Marty!" His father's shout followed him out of the parlor. It seemed to act like a hand between the shoulder-blades, because the boy almost ran as he got down the porch stairs.

"What is it, Howard?" Marty's mother asked in a worried voice as she came in from the kitchen, her damp hands rubbing themselves dry against the sides of her housedress.

"Crazy kid," Howard Isherwood muttered. He stared at the figure of his son as the boy reached the end of the walk and turned off into the street. *"Come back here!"* he shouted. "A rocket pilot," he cursed under his breath. "What's the kid been reading? Claiming he's a rocket pilot!"

Margaret Isherwood's brow furrowed into a faint, bewildered frown. "But— isn't he a little young? I know they're teaching some very odd things in high schools these days, but it seems to me..."

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Marge, there aren't even any rockets yet! *Come back here, you idiot!"* Howard Isherwood was standing on his porch, his clenched fists trembling at the ends of his stiffly-held arms.

"Are you sure, Howard?" his wife asked faintly.

"Yes, I'm *sure!*"

"But, where's he going?"

"Stop that! Get off that bus! You hear me? Marty?"

"Howard! Stop acting like a child and talk to me! Where is that boy going?"

Howard Isherwood, stocky, red-faced, forty-seven, and defeated, turned away from the retreating bus and looked at his wife. "I don't know," he told her bitterly, between rushes of air into his jerkily heaving lungs. "Maybe, the moon," he told her sarcastically.

Martin Isherwood, rocket pilot, weight 102, height 4', 11", had come of age at seventeen.

The small man looked at his faculty advisor. “No,” he said. “I am not interested in working for a degree.”

“But—” The faculty advisor unconsciously tapped the point of a yellow pencil against the fresh green of his desk blotter, leaving a rough arc of black flecks. “Look, Ish, you’ve got to either deliver or get off the basket. This program is just like the others you’ve followed for nine semesters; nothing but math and engineering. You’ve taken just about every undergrad course there is in those fields. How long are you going to keep this up?”

“I’m signed up for Astronomy 101,” Isherwood pointed out.

The faculty advisor snorted. “A snap course. A breather, after you’ve studied the same stuff in Celestial Navigation. What’s the matter, Ish? Scared of liberal arts?”

Isherwood shook his head. “Uh-unh. Not interested. No time. And that Astronomy course isn’t a breather. Different slant from Cee Nav—they won’t be talking about stars as check points, but as things in themselves.” Something seemed to flicker across his face as he said it.

The advisor missed it; he was too engrossed in his argument. “Still a snap. What’s the difference, how you look at a star?”

Isherwood almost winced. “Call it a hobby,” he said. He looked down at his watch. “Come on, Dave. You’re not going to convince me. You haven’t convinced me any of the other times, either, so you might as well give up, don’t you think? I’ve got a half hour before I go on the job. Let’s go get some beer.”

The advisor, not much older than Isherwood, shrugged, defeated. “Crazy,” he muttered. But it was a hot day, and he was as thirsty as the next man.

The bar was air conditioned. The advisor shivered, half grinned, and softly quoted:

“Though I go bare, take ye no care,
I am nothing a-cold;

I stuff my skin so full within
Of jolly good ale and old.”

“Huh?” Ish was wearing the look with which he always reacted to the unfamiliar.

The advisor lifted two fingers to the bartender and shrugged. “It’s a poem; about four hundred years old, as a matter of fact.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t you give a damn?” the advisor asked, with some peevishness.

Ish laughed shortly, without embarrassment. “Sorry, Dave, but no. It’s not my racket.”

The advisor cramped his hand a little too tightly around his glass. “Strictly a specialist, huh?”

Ish nodded. “Call it that.”

“But *what*, for Pete’s sake? What *is* this crazy specialty that blinds you to all the fine things that man has done?”

Ish took a swallow of his beer. “Well, now, if I was a poet, I’d say it was the finest thing that man has ever done.”

The advisor’s lips twisted in derision. “That’s pretty fanatical, isn’t it?”

“Uh-huh.” Ish waved to the bartender for refills.

The *Navion* took a boiling thermal under its right wing and bucked upward suddenly, tilting at the same time, so that the pretty brunette girl in the other half of the side-by-side was thrown against him. Ish laughed, a sound that came out of his throat as turbulently as that sudden gust of heated air had shot up out of the Everglades, and corrected with a tilt of the wheel.

“Relax, Nan,” he said, his words colored by the lingering laughter. “It’s only air; nasty old air.”

The girl patted her short hair back into place. “I wish you wouldn’t fly this low,” she said, half-frightened.

“*Low? Call this low?*” Ish teased. “Here. Let’s drop it a little, and you’ll *really* get an idea of how fast we’re going.” He nudged the wheel forward, and the *Navion* dipped its nose in a shallow dive, flattening out thirty feet above the mangrove. The swamp howled with the chug of the dancing pistons and the claw of the propeller at the protesting air, and, from the cockpit, the Everglades resolved into a dirty-green blur that rocketed backward into the slipstream.

“Marty!”

Ish chuckled again. He couldn’t have held the ship down much longer, anyway. He tugged back on the wheel suddenly, targeting a cumulous bank with his spinner. His lips peeled back from his teeth, and his jaw set. The *Navion* went up at the clouds, her engine turning over as fast as it could, her wings cushioned on the rising thrust of another thermal.

And, suddenly, it was as if there were no girl beside him, to be teased, and no air to rock the wings—there were no wings. His face lost all expression. Faint beads of sweat broke out above his eyes and under his nose. “Up,” he grunted through his clenched teeth. His fists locked on the wheel. “Up!”

The *Navion* broke through the cloud, kept going. “Up.” If he listened closely, in just the right way, he could almost hear...

“Marty!”

... the rumble of a louder, prouder engine than the Earth had ever known. He sighed, the breath whispering through his parting teeth, and the aircraft leveled off as he pushed at the wheel with suddenly lax hands. Still half-lost, he turned and looked at the white-faced girl. “Scare you—?” he asked gently.

She nodded. Her fingertips were trembling on his forearm.

“Me too,” he said. “Lost my head. Sorry.”

“Look,” he told the girl, “You got any idea of what it costs to maintain a racing-plane? Everything I own is tied up in the Foo, my ground crew, my trailer, and that scrummy old Ryan that should have been salvaged ten years ago. I *can't* get married. Suppose I crack the Foo next week? You're dead broke, a widow, and with a funeral to pay for. The only smart thing to do is wait a while.”

Nan's eyes clouded, and her lips trembled. “That's what I've been trying to say. *Why* do you have to win the Vandenberg Cup next week? Why can't you sell the Foo and go into some kind of business? You're a trained pilot.”

He had been standing in front of her with his body unconsciously tense from the strain of trying to make her understand. Now he relaxed—more—he slumped—and something began to die in his face, and the first faint lines crept in to show that after it had died, it would not return to life, but would fossilize, leaving his features in the almost unreadable mask that the newspapers would come to know.

“I'm a good bit more than a trained pilot,” he said quietly. “The Foo is a means to an end. After I win the Vandenberg Cup, I can walk into any plant in the States—Douglas, North American, Boeing—*any* of them—and pick up the Chief Test Pilot's job for the asking. A few of them have as good as said so. After that—” His voice had regained some of its former animation from this new source. Now he broke off, and shrugged. “I've told you all this before.”

The girl reached up, as if the physical touch could bring him back to her, and put her fingers around his wrist.

“Darling!” she said. “If it's that *rocket* pilot business again....”

Somehow, his wrist was out of her encircling fingers. “It's always ‘that *rocket* pilot business,’” he said, mimicking her voice. “Damn it, I'm the only trained rocket pilot in the world! I weigh a hundred and fifteen pounds, I'm five feet

tall, and I know more navigation and math than anybody the Air Force or Navy have! I can use words like 'brennschluss' and 'mass-ratio' without running over to a copy of *Colliers*, and I—" He stopped himself, half-smiled, and shrugged again.

"I guess I was kidding myself. After the Cup, there'll be the test job, and after that, there'll be the rockets. You would have had to wait a long time."

All she could think of to say was, "But, Darling, there *aren't* any man-carrying rockets."

"That's not my fault," he said, and walked away from her.

A week later, he took his stripped-down F-110 across the last line with a scream like that of a hawk that brings its prey safely to its nest.

He brought the Mark VII out of her orbit after two days of running rings around the spinning Earth, and the world loved him. He climbed out of the crackling, pinging ship, bearded and dirty, with oil on his face and in his hair, with food stains all over his whipcord, red-eyed, and huskily quiet as he said his few words into the network microphones. And he was not satisfied. There was no peace in his eyes, and his hands moved even more sharply in their expressive gestures as he gave an impromptu report to the technicians who were walking back to the personnel bunker with him.

Nan could see that. Four years ago, he had been different. Four years ago, if she had only known the right words, he wouldn't be so intent now on throwing himself away to the sky.

She was a woman scorned. She had to lie to herself. She broke out of the press section and ran over to him. "Marty!"

She brushed past a technician.

He looked at her with faint surprise on his face. "Well, Nan!" he mumbled. But he did not put his hand over her own where it touched his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Marty," she said in a rush. "I didn't understand. I couldn't see how much it all meant." Her face was flushed, and she spoke as rapidly as she could, not noticing that Ish had already gestured away the guards she was afraid would interrupt her.

"But it's all right, now. You got your rockets. You've done it. You trained yourself for it, and now it's over. You've flown your rocket!"

He looked up at her face and shook his head in quiet pity. One of the shocked technicians was trying to pull her away, and Ish made no move to stop him.

Suddenly, he was tired, there was something in him that was trying to break out against his will, and his reaction was that of a child whose candy is being taken away from him after only one bite.

"Rocket!" he shouted into her terrified face. "*Rocket!* Call that pile of tin a rocket?" He pointed at the weary Mark VII with a trembling arm. "Who cares about the bloody *machines!* If I thought roller-skating would get me there, I would have gone to work in a *rink* when I was seventeen! It's *getting there* that counts! Who gives a good goddam *how* it's done, or what with!"

And he stood there, shaking like a leaf, outraged, while the guards came and got her.

"Sit down, Ish," the Flight Surgeon said.

They always begin that way, Isherwood thought. The standard medical opening. Sit down. What for? Did somebody really believe that anything he might hear would make him faint? He smiled with as much expression as he

ever did, and chose a comfortable chair, rolling the white cylinder of a cigarette between his fingers. He glanced at his watch. Fourteen hours, thirty-six minutes, and four days to go.

“How’s it?” the F.S. asked.

Ish grinned and shrugged. “All right.” But he didn’t usually grin. The realization disquieted him a little.

“Think you’ll make it?”

Deliberately, rather than automatically, he fell back into his usual response-pattern. “Don’t know. That’s what I’m being paid to find out.”

“Uh-huh.” The F.S. tapped the eraser of his pencil against his teeth. “Look—you want to talk to a man for a while?”

“What man?” It didn’t really matter. He had a feeling that anything he said or did now would have a bearing, somehow, on the trip. If they wanted him to do something for them, he was bloody well going to do it.

“Fellow named MacKenzie. Big gun in the head-thumping racket.” The Flight Surgeon was trying to be as casual as he could. “Air Force insisted on it, as a matter of fact,” he said. “Can’t really blame them. After all, it’s *their* beast.”

“Don’t want any hole-heads denting it up on them, huh?” Ish lit the cigarette and flipped his lighter shut with a snap of the lid. “Sure. Bring him on.”

The F.S. smiled. “Good. He’s—uh—he’s in the next room. Okay to ask him in right now?”

“Sure.” Something flickered in Isherwood’s eyes. Amusement at the Flight Surgeon’s discomfort was part of it. Worry was some of the rest.

MacKenzie didn’t seem to be taking any notes, or paying any special attention to the answers Ish was giving to his casual questions. But the questions fell into a pattern that

was far from casual, and Ish could see the small button-mike of a portable tape-recorder nestling under the man's lapel.

"Been working your own way for the last seventeen years, haven't you?" MacKenzie seemed to mumble in a perfectly clear voice.

Ish nodded.

"How's that?"

The corners of Isherwood's mouth twitched, and he said "Yes" for the recorder's benefit.

"Odd jobs, first of all?"

"Something like that. Anything I could get, the first few months. After I was halfway set up, I stuck to garages and repair shops."

"Out at the airports around Miami, mostly, wasn't it?"

"Ahuh."

"Took some of your pay in flying lessons."

"Right."

MacKenzie's face passed no judgements—he simply hunched in his chair, seemingly dwarfed by the shoulders of his perfectly tailored suit, his stubby fingers twiddling a Phi Beta Kappa key. He was a spare man—only a step or two away from emaciation. Occasionally, he pushed a tired strand of washed-out hair away from his forehead.

Ish answered him truthfully, without more than ordinary reservations. This was the man who could ground him. He was dangerous—red-letter dangerous—because of it.

"No family."

Ish shrugged. "Not that I know of. Cut out at seventeen. My father was making good money. He had a pension plan, insurance policies. No need to worry about them."

Ish knew the normal reaction a statement like that should have brought. MacKenzie's face did not go into a blank of repression—but it still passed no judgements.

"How's things between you and the opposite sex?"

"About normal."

"No wife—no steady girl."

“Not a very good idea, in my racket.”

MacKenzie grunted. Suddenly, he sat bolt upright in his chair, and swung toward Ish. His lean arm shot out, and his index finger was aimed between Isherwood’s eyes. “You can’t go!”

Ish was on his feet, his fists clenched, the blood throbbing in his temple veins. “What!” he roared.

MacKenzie seemed to collapse in his chair. The brief commanding burst was over, and his face was apologetic, “Sorry,” he said. He seemed genuinely abashed. “Shotgun therapy. Works best, sometimes. You can go, all right; I just wanted to get a fast check on your reactions and drives.”

Ish could feel the anger that still ran through him—anger, and more fear than he wanted to admit. “I’m due at a briefing,” he said tautly. “You through with me?”

MacKenzie nodded, still embarrassed. “Sorry.”

Ish ignored the man’s obvious feelings. He stopped at the door to send a parting stroke at the thing that had frightened him. “Big gun in the psychiatry racket, huh? Well, your professional lingo’s slipping, Doc. They did put *some* learning in my head at college, you know. Therapy, hell! Testing maybe, but you sure didn’t do anything to help me!”

“I don’t know,” MacKenzie said softly. “I wish I did.”

Ish slammed the door behind him. He stood in the corridor, jamming a fresh cigarette in his mouth. He threw a glance at his watch. Twelve hours, twenty-two minutes, and four days to go.

Damn! He was late for the briefing. Odd—that fool psychiatrist hadn’t seemed to take up that much of his time.

He shrugged. What difference did it make? As he strode down the hall, he lost his momentary puzzlement under the flood of realization that nothing could stop him now, that the last hurdle was beaten. He was going. He was going, and if there were faint echoes of “Marty!” ringing in the dark background of his mind, they only served to push him faster, as they always had. Nothing but death could stop him now.

Ish looked up bitterly at the Receptionist. “No,” he said.

“But *everybody* fills out an application,” she protested.

“No. I’ve *got* a job,” he said as he had been saying for the last half hour.

The Receptionist sighed. “If you’ll *only* read the literature I’ve given you, you’ll understand that all your previous commitments have been cancelled.”

“Look, Honey, I’ve seen company poop sheets before. Now, let’s cut this nonsense. I’ve got to get back.”

“But *nobody* goes back.”

“Goddam it, I don’t know what kind of place this is, but—” He stopped at the Receptionist’s wince, and looked around, his mouth open. The reception desk was solid enough. There were IN and OUT and HOLD baskets on the desk, and the Receptionist seemed to see nothing extraordinary about it. But the room—a big room, he realized—seemed to fade out at the edges, rather than stop at walls. The lighting, too....

“Let’s see your back!” he rapped out, his voice high.

She sighed in exasperation. “If you’d read the *literature*...” She swiveled her chair slowly.

“No wings,” he said.

“Of course not!” she snapped. She brushed her hair away from her forehead without his telling her to. “No horns, either.”

“Streamlined, huh?” he said bitterly.

“It’s a little different for everybody,” she said with unexpected gentleness. “It would have to be, wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” he admitted slowly. Then he lost his momentary awe, and his posture grew tense again. He glanced down at his wrist. Six hours, forty-seven minutes, and no days to go.

“Who do I see?”

She stared at him, bewildered at the sudden change in his voice. “See?”

“About getting out of here! Come on, come on,” he barked, snapping his fingers impatiently. “I haven’t got much time.”

She smiled sweetly. “Oh, but you do.”

“Can it! Who’s your Section boss? Get him down here. On the double. Come on!” His face was streaming with perspiration but his voice was firm with the purpose that drove him.

Her lips closed into an angry line, and she jabbed a finger at a desk button. “I’ll call the Personnel Manager.”

“Thanks,” he said sarcastically, and waited impatiently. Odd, the way the Receptionist looked a little like Nan.

The Personnel Manager wore a perfectly-tailored suit. He strode across the lobby floor toward Ish, his hand outstretched.

“Martin Isherwood!” he exclaimed enthusiastically. “I’m very glad to meet you!”

“I’ll bet,” Ish said dryly, giving the Personnel Manager’s hand a short shake. “I’ve got other ideas. I want out.”

“That’s all he’s been saying for the past forty-five minutes, Sir,” the Receptionist said from behind her desk.

The Personnel Manager frowned. “Um. Yes. Well, that’s not unprecedented.”

“But hardly usual,” he added.

Ish found himself liking the man. He had a job to do, and after the preliminary formality of the greeting had been passed, he was ready to buckle down to it. Oh, he—shucks?—the Receptionist wasn’t such a bad girl, either. He smiled at her. “Sorry I lost my head,” he said.

She smiled back. “It happens.”

He took time to give her one more smile and a half-wink, and swung back to the Personnel Manager.

“Now. Let’s get this thing straightened out. I’ve got—” He stopped to look at his watch. “Six hours and a few minutes.

They're fueling the beast right now."

"Do you know how much red tape you'd have to cut?"

Ish shook his head. "I don't want to sound nasty, but that's your problem."

The Personnel Manager hesitated. "Look—you feel you've got a job unfinished. Or, anyway, that's the way you'd put it. But, let's face it—that's not really what's galling you. It's not really the job, is it? It's just that you think you've been cheated out of what you devoted your life to."

Ish could feel his jaw muscles bunching. "Don't put words in my mouth!" he snapped. "Just get me back, and we'll split hairs about it when I get around this way again." Suddenly, he found himself pleading. "All I need is a week," he said. "It'll be a rough week—no picnic, no pleasures of the flesh. No smoking, no liquor. I certainly won't be breaking any laws. One week. Get there, putter around for two days, and back again. Then, you can do anything you want to—as long as it doesn't look like the trip's responsible, of course."

The Personnel Manager hesitated. "Suppose—" he began, but Ish interrupted him.

"Look, they need it, down there. They've got to have a target, someplace to go. We're built for it. People have to have—but what am I telling *you* for. If you don't know, who does?"

The Personnel Manager smiled. "I was about to say something."

Ish stopped, abashed. "Sorry."

He waved the apology away with a short movement of his hand. "You've got to understand that what you've been saying isn't a valid claim. If it were, human history would be very different, wouldn't it?"

"Suppose I showed you something, first? Then, you could decide whether you want to stay, after all."

"How long's it going to take?" Ish flushed under the memory of having actually begged for something.

“Not long,” the Personnel Manager said. He half-turned and pointed up at the Earth, hanging just beyond the wall of the crater in which they were suddenly standing.

“Earth,” the Personnel Manager said.

Somehow, Ish was not astonished. He looked up at the Earth, touched by cloud and sunlight, marked with ocean and continent, crowned with ice. The unblinking stars filled the night.

He looked around him. The Moon was silent—quiet, patient, waiting. Somewhere, a metal glint against the planet above, if it were only large enough to be seen, was the Station, and the ship for which the Moon had waited.

Ish walked a short distance. He was leaving no tracks in the pumice the ages had sown. But it was the way he had thought of it, nevertheless. It was the way the image had slowly built up in his mind, through the years, through the training, through the work. It was what he had aimed the *Navion* at, that day over the Everglades.

“It’s not the same,” he said.

The Personnel Manager sighed.

“Don’t you see,” Ish said, “It *can’t* be the same. I didn’t push the beast up here. There wasn’t any *feel* to it. There wasn’t any sound of rockets.”

The Personnel Manager sighed again. “There wouldn’t be, you know. Taking off from the Station, landing here—vacuum.”

Ish shook his head. “There’d still be a sound. Maybe not for anybody else to hear—and, maybe, maybe there *would* be. There’d be people, back on Earth, who’d hear it.”

“All right,” the Personnel Manager said. His face was grave, but his eyes were shining a little.

“Ish! Hey, Ish, wake up, will you!” There was a hand on his shoulder. “Will you get a *load* of this guy!” the voice said to

someone else. "An hour to go, and he's sleeping like the dead."

Ish willed his eyes to open. He felt his heart begin to move again, felt the blood sluggishly beginning to surge into his veins. His hands and feet were very cold.

"Come on, Ish," the Crew Chief said.

"All right," he mumbled. "Okay. I'm up." He sat on the edge of his bunk looking down at his hands. They were blue under the fingernails. He sighed, feeling the air moving down into his lungs.

Stiffly, he got to his feet and began to climb into his G suit.

The Moon opened its face to him. From where he lay, strapped into the control seat in the forward bubble, he looked at it emotionlessly, and began to brake for a landing.

He looked for footprints in the crater, though he knew he hadn't left any. Earth was a familiar sight over his right shoulder.

He brought the twin-bubble beast back to the station. They threw spotlights on it, for the TV pickups, and thrust microphones at him. He could see broad grins behind the faceplates of the suits the docking crew wore, and they were pounding his back. The interior of the Station was a babbling of voices, a tumult of congratulations. He looked at it all, dead-faced, his eyes empty.

"It was easy," he said over a worldwide network, and pushed the press representatives out of his way.

MacKenzie was waiting for him in the crew section. Ish flicked his stolid eyes at him, shrugged, and stripped out of his clothes. He pulled a coverall out of a locker and climbed into it, then went over to his bunk and lay down on his side, facing the bulkhead.

“Ish.”

It was MacKenzie, bending over him.

Ish grunted.

“It wasn’t any good was it? You’d done it all before; you’d been there.”

He was past emotions. “Yeah?”

“We couldn’t take the chance.” MacKenzie was trying desperately to explain. “You were the best there was—but you’d done something to yourself by becoming the best. You shut yourself off from your family. You had no close friends, no women. You had no other interests. You were a rocket pilot—nothing else. You’ve never read an adult book that wasn’t a text; you’ve never listened to a symphony except by accident. You don’t know Rembrandt from Norman Rockwell. Nothing. No ties, no props, nothing to sustain you if something went wrong. *We couldn’t take the chance, Ish!*”

“So?”

“There was too much at stake. If we let you go, you might have forgotten to come back. You might have just kept going.”

He remembered the time with the *Navion*, and nodded. “I might have.”

“I hypnotized you,” MacKenzie said. “You were never dead. I don’t know what the details of your hallucination were, but the important part came through, all right. You thought you’d been to the Moon before. It took all the adventure out of the actual flight; it was just a workaday trip.”

“I said it was easy,” Ish said.

“There was no other way to do it! I had to cancel out the thrill that comes from challenging the unknown. You knew

what death was like, and you knew what the Moon was like.
Can you understand why I had to do it?"

"Yeah. Now get out before I kill you."

He didn't live too long after that. He never entered a rocket again—he died on the Station, and was buried in space, while a grateful world mourned him. I wonder what it was like, in his mind, when he really died. But he spent the days he had, after the trip, just sitting at an observatory port, cursing the traitor stars with his dead and purposeless eyes.

CITADEL

I

The aging man was sweating profusely, and he darted sidelong glances at the windowless walls of the outer office. By turns, he sat stiffly in a corner chair or paced uneasily, his head swiveling constantly.

His hand was clammy when Mead shook it.

“Hello, Mr. Mead,” he said in a husky, hesitant voice, his eyes never quite still, never long on Mead’s face, but darting hither and yon, his glance rebounding at every turn from the walls, the floor, the ceiling, the closed outer door.

Christopher Mead, Assistant Undersecretary for External Affairs, returned the handshake, smiling. “Please come into my office,” he said quickly. “It’s much more spacious.”

“Thank you,” the aging man said gratefully and hurried into the next room. Mead rapidly opened the windows, and some of the man’s nervousness left him. He sank down into the visitor’s chair in front of Mead’s desk, his eyes drinking in the distances beyond the windows. “Thank you,” he repeated.

Mead sat down behind the desk, leaned back, and waited for the man’s breathing to slow. Finally he said, “It’s good to see you again, Mr. Holliday. What can I do for you?”

Martin Holliday tore his glance away from the window long enough to raise his eyes to Mead’s face and then drop them

to the hands he had folded too deliberately in his lap.

“I’d—” His voice husked into unintelligibility, and he had to begin again. “I’d like to take an option on a new planet,” he finally said.

Mead nodded. “I don’t see why not.” He gestured expressively at the star chart papered over one wall of his office. “We’ve certainly got plenty of them. But what happened with your first one?”

“It d-d-duh—”

“Mr. Holliday, I certainly won’t be offended if you’d prefer to look out the window,” Mead said quickly.

“Thank you.” After a moment, he began again. “It didn’t work out,” he said, his glance flickering back to Mead for an instant before he had to look out the window again.

“I don’t know where my figuring went wrong. It *didn’t* go wrong. It was just... just *things*. I thought I could sell enough subdivisions to cover the payments and still keep most of it for myself, but it didn’t work out.”

He looked quickly at Mead with a flash of groundless guilt in his eyes. “First I had to sell more than I’d intended, because I had to lower the original price. Somebody’d optioned another planet in the same system, and I hadn’t counted on the competition. Then, even after I’d covered the option and posted surety on the payments, there were all kinds of expenses. Then I couldn’t lease the mineral rights—” He looked at Mead again, as though he had to justify himself. “I don’t know how that deal fell through. The company just... just *withdrew*, all of a sudden.”

“Do you think there might have been anything peculiar about that?” Mead asked. “I mean—could the company have made a deal with the colonists for a lower price after you’d been forced out?”

Holliday shook his head quickly. “Oh, no—nothing like that. The colonists and I got along fine. It wasn’t as though I hadn’t put the best land up for sale, or tried to make myself rich. Why, after I’d had to sell some of the remaining land,

and I knew it wasn't worth staying, any more, some of them offered to lend me enough money to keep fifty thousand square miles for myself." He smiled warmly, his eyes blank while he focused on memory.

"But that wasn't it, of course," he went on. "I had my original investment back. But I couldn't tell them why I couldn't stay. It was *people*—even if I never saw them, it was the thought of people, with aircraft and rockets and roads—"

"I understand, Mr. Holliday," Mead said in an effort to spare him embarrassment.

Holliday looked at him helplessly. "I couldn't tell them that, could I, Mr. Mead? They were good, friendly people who wanted to help me. I couldn't tell them it was people, could I?"

He wet his dry lips and locked his eyes on the view outside the window. "All I want, Mr. Mead, is half a planet to myself," he said softly.

He shook his head. "Well, it'll work out this time. This time, I won't have to sell so much, and I'll have a place to spend what time I've got left in peace, without this... this—" He gestured helplessly in an effort to convey his tortured consciousness of his own fear.

Mead nodded quickly as he saw his features knot convulsively. "Of course, Mr. Holliday. We'll get you an option on a new planet as quickly as we can."

"Thank you," Holliday said again. "Can we... can we handle it today? I've had my credit transferred to a local bank."

"Certainly, Mr. Holliday. We won't keep you on Earth a moment longer than absolutely necessary." He took a standard form out of a desk drawer and passed it to Holliday for his signature.

"I'll be smarter this time," the aging man said, trying to convince himself, as he uncapped his pen. "This time, it'll work out."

"I'm sure it will, Mr. Holliday," Mead said.

II

Marlowe was obese. He sat behind his desk like a tuskless sea lion crouched behind a rock, and his cheeks merged into jowls and obliterated his neck. His desk was built specially, so that he could get his thighs under it. His office chair was heavier and wider by far than any standard size, its casters rolling on a special composition base that had been laid down over the carpeting, for Marlowe's weight would have cut any ordinary rug to shreds. His jacket stretched like pliofilm to enclose the bulk of his stooped shoulders, and his eyes surveyed his world behind the battlemented heaviness of the puffing flesh that filled their sockets.

A bulb flickered on his interphone set, and Marlowe shot a glance at the switch beneath it.

"Secretary, quite contrary," he muttered inaudibly. He flicked the switch. "Yes, Mary?" His voice rumbled out of the flabby cavern of his chest.

"Mr. Mead has just filed a report on Martin Holliday, Mr. Secretary. Would you like to see it?"

"Just give me a summary, Mary."

Under his breath he whispered, "Summary that mummery, Mary," and a thin smile fell about his lips while he listened. "Gave him Karlshaven IV, eh?" he observed when his secretary'd finished. "OK. Thanks, Mary."

He switched off and sat thinking. Somewhere in the bowels of the Body Administrative, he knew, notations were being made and cross-filed. The addition of Karlshaven IV to the list of planets under colonization would be made, and Holliday's asking prices for land would be posted with Emigration, together with a prospectus abstracted from the General Galactic Survey.

He switched the interphone on again.

“Uh... Mary? Supply me with a copy of the GenSurv on the entire Karlshaven system. Tell Mr. Mead I’ll expect him in my office sometime this afternoon—you schedule it—and we’ll go into it further.”

“Yes, Mr. Secretary. Will fifteen-fifteen be all right?”

“Fifteen-fifteen’s fine, uh... Mary,” Marlowe said gently.

“Yes, sir,” his secretary replied, abashed. “I keep forgetting about proper nomenclature.”

“So do I, Mary, so do I,” Marlowe sighed. “Anything come up that wasn’t scheduled for today?”

It was a routine question, born of futile hope. There was always something to spoil the carefully planned daily schedules.

“Yes and no, sir.”

Marlowe cocked an eyebrow at the interphone.

“Well, that’s a slight change, anyway. What is it?”

“There’s a political science observer from Dovenil—that’s Moore II on our maps, sir—who’s requested permission to talk to you. He’s here on the usual exchange program, and he’s within his privileges in asking, of course. I assume it’s the ordinary thing—what’s our foreign policy, how do you apply it, can you give specific instances, and the like.”

Precisely, Marlowe thought. For ordinary questions there were standard answers, and Mary had been his secretary for so long that she could supply them as well as he could.

Dovenil. Moore II, eh? Obviously, there was something special about the situation, and Mary was leaving the decision to him. He scanned through his memorized star catalogues, trying to find the correlation.

“Mr. Secretary?”

Marlowe grunted. “Still here. Just thinking. Isn’t Dovenil that nation we just sent Harrison to?”

“Yes, sir. On the same exchange program.”

Marlowe chuckled. “Well, if we’ve got *Harrison* down there, it’s only fair to let their fellow learn something in exchange, isn’t it? What’s his name?”

“Dalish ud Klavan, sir.”

Marlowe muttered to himself: “Dalish ud Klavan, Irish, corn beef and cabbage.” His mind filed it away together with a primary-color picture of Jiggs and Maggie.

“All right, Mary, I’ll talk to him, if you can find room in the schedule somewhere. Tell you what—let him in at fifteen-thirty. Mead and I can furnish a working example for him. Does that check all right with your book?”

“Yes, sir. There’ll be time if we carry over on the Ceroii incidents.”

“Ceroii’s waited six years, four months, and twenty-three days. They’ll wait another day. Let’s do that, then, uh... Mary.”

“Yes, sir.”

Marlowe switched off and picked up a report which he began to read by the page-block system, his eyes almost unblinking between pages. “Harrison, eh?” he muttered once, stopping to look quizzically at his desktop. He chuckled.



At fifteen-fifteen, the light on his interphone blinked twice, and Marlowe hastily initialed a directive with his right hand while touching the switch with his left.

“Yes, Mary?”

“Mr. Mead, sir.”

“OK.” He switched off, pushed the directive into his out box, and pulled the GenSurv and the folder on Martin Holliday out of the HOLD tray. “Come in, Chris,” he said as Mead knocked on the door.

“How are you today, Mr. Marlowe?” Mead asked as he sat down.

“Four ounces heavier,” Marlowe answered dryly. “I presume you’re not. Cigarette, Chris?”

Apparently, the use of the first name finally caught Mead’s notice. He looked thoughtful for a moment, then took a cigarette and lit it. “Thanks—Dave.”

“Well, I’m glad that’s settled,” Marlowe chuckled, his eyes almost disappearing in crinkles of flesh. “How’s Mary?”

Mead grinned crookedly. “*Miss Folsom* is in fine fettle today, thank you.”

Marlowe rumbled a laugh. Mead had once made the mistake of addressing the woman as “Mary,” under the natural assumption that if Marlowe could do it, everyone could.

“Mary, I fear,” Marlowe observed, “lives in more stately times than these. She’ll tolerate informality from me because I’m in direct authority over her, and direct authority, of course, is Law. But you, Mead, are a young whippersnapper.”

“But that’s totally unrealistic!” Mead protested. “I don’t respect her less by using her first name... it’s just... just friendliness, that’s all.”

“Look,” Marlowe said, “it makes sense, but it ain’t logical—not on her terms. Mary Folsom was raised by a big, tough, tightlipped authoritarian of a father who believed in bringing kids up by the book. By the time she got tumbled out into the world, all big men were unquestionable authority and all young men were callow whippersnappers. Sure, she’s unhappy about it, inside. But it makes her a perfect secretary, for me, and she does her job well. We play by her rules on the little things, and by the world’s rules on the big ones. Kapish?”

“Sure, Dave, but—”

Marlowe picked up the folder on Holliday and gave Mead one weighty but understanding look before he opened it.

“Your trouble, Chris, is that your viewpoint is fundamentally sane,” he said. “Now, about Holliday, Martin, options 062–26–8729, 063–108–1004. I didn’t get time to read the GenSurv on the Karlshaven planets, so I’ll ask you to brief me.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What’s IV like?”

“Good, arable land. A little mountainous in spots, but that’s good. Loaded with minerals—industrial stuff, like silver. Some tin, but not enough to depress the monetary standard. Lots of copper. Coal beds, petroleum basins, the works. Self-supporting practically from the start, a real asset to the Union in fifty-six years.”

Marlowe nodded. “Good. Nice picking, Chris. Now—got a decoy?”

“Yes, sir. Karlshaven II’s a False-E. I’ve got a dummy option on it in the works, and we’ll be able to undercut Holliday’s prices for his land by about twenty percent.”

“False-E, huh? How long do you figure until the colony can’t stick on it any longer?”

“A fair-sized one, with lots of financial backing, might even make it permanently. But we won’t be able to dig up that many loafers, and, naturally, we can’t give them that big a subsidy. Eventually, we’ll have to ferry them all out—in about eight years, say. But that’ll give us time enough to break Holliday.”

Marlowe nodded again. “Sounds good.”

“Something else,” Mead said. “II’s mineral-poor. It’s near to being solid metal. That’s what makes it impossible to really live on, but I figure we can switch the mineral companies right onto it and off IV.”

Marlowe grinned approvingly. “You been saving this one for Holliday?”

“Yes, sir,” Mead said, nodding slowly. He looked hesitantly at Marlowe.

“What’s up, Boy?”

“Well, sir—” Mead began, then stopped. “Nothing important, really.”

Marlowe gave him a surprising look full of sadness and brooding understanding.

“You’re thinking he’s an old, frightened man, and why don’t we leave him alone?”

“Why... yes, sir.”

“Dave.”

“Yes, Dave.”

“You’re quite right. Why don’t we?”

“We can’t, sir. I know that. But it doesn’t seem fair—”

“Exactly, Chris. It ain’t right, but it’s correct.”

The light on Marlowe’s interphone blinked once. Marlowe looked at it in momentary surprise. Then his features cleared, and he muttered “Cabbage.” He reached out toward the switch.

“We’ve got a visitor, Chris. Follow my lead.” He reviewed his information on Dovenilid titular systems while he touched the switch. “Ask ud Klavan to come in, uh... Mary.”

IV

Dalish ud Klavan was almost a twin for the pictured typical Dovenilid in Marlowe’s library. Since the pictures were usually idealized, it followed that Klavan was an above-average specimen of his people. He stood a full eight feet from fetters to crest, and had not yet begun to thicken his shoes in compensation for the stoop that marked advancing middle age for his race.

Marlowe, looking at him, smiled inwardly. No Dovenilid could be so obviously superior and still only a lowly student.

Well, considering Harrison's qualifications, it might still not be tit for tat.

Mead began to get to his feet, and Marlowe hastily planted a foot atop his nearest shoe. The assistant winced and twitched his lips, but at least he stayed down.

"Dalish ud Klavan," the Dovenilid pronounced, in good English.

"David Marlowe, Secretary for External Affairs, Solar Union," Marlowe replied.

Ud Klavan looked expectantly at Mead.

"Christopher Mead, Assistant Undersecretary for External Affairs," the assistant said, orientating himself.

"If you would do us the honor of permitting us to stand—" Marlowe asked politely.

"On the contrary, Marlowe. If you would do me the honor of permitting me to sit, I should consider it a privilege."

"Please do so. Mr. Mead, if you would bring our visitor a chair—"

They lost themselves in formalities for a few minutes, Marlowe being urbanely correct, Mead following after as best he could through the maze of Dovenilid mores. Finally they were able to get down to the business at hand, ud Klavan sitting with considerable comfort in the carefully designed chair which could be snapped into almost any shape, Marlowe bulking behind his desk, Mead sitting somewhat nervously beside him.

"Now, as I understand it, ud Klavan," Marlowe began, "you'd like to learn something of our policies and methods."

"That is correct, Marlowe and Mead." The Dovenilid extracted a block of opaque material from the flat wallet at his side and steadied it on his knee. "I have your permission to take notes?"

"Please do. Now, as it happens, Mr. Mead and I are currently considering a case which perfectly illustrates our policies."

Ud Klavan immediately traced a series of ideographs on the note block, and Marlowe wondered if he was actually going to take their conversation down verbatim. He shrugged mentally. He'd have to ask him, at some later date, whether he'd missed anything. Undoubtedly, there'd be a spare recording of the tape he himself was making.

"To begin: As you know, our government is founded upon principles of extreme personal freedom. There are no arbitrary laws governing expression, worship, the possession of personal weapons, or the rights of personal property. The state is construed to be a mechanism of public service, operated by the Body Politic, and the actual regulation and regimentation of society is accomplished by natural socioeconomic laws which, of course, are both universal and unavoidable.

"We pride ourselves on the high status of the individual in comparison to the barely-tolerable existence of the state. We do, naturally, have ordinances and injunctions governing crimes, but even these are usually superseded by civil action at the personal level."

Marlowe leaned forward a trifle. "Forgetting exact principles for a moment, ud Klavan, you realize that the actuality will sometimes stray from the ideal. Our citizens, for example, do not habitually carry weapons except under extraordinary conditions. But that is a civil taboo, rather than a fixed amendment of our constitution. I have no doubt that some future generation, mores having shifted, will, for example, revive the *code duello*."

Ud Klavan nodded. "Quite understood, thank you, Marlowe."

"Good. Now, to proceed:

"Under conditions such as those, the state and its agencies *cannot* lay down a fixed policy of any sort, and

expect it to be in the least permanent. The people will not tolerate such regulation, and with each new shift in social mores—and the institution of any policy is itself sufficient to produce such a shift within a short time—successive policies are repudiated by the Body Politic, and new ones must be instituted.”

Marlowe leaned back and spread his hands. “Therefore,” he said with a rueful smile, “it can fairly be said that we *have* no foreign policy, effectively speaking. We pursue the expedient, ud Klavan, and hope for the best. The case which Mr. Mead and I are currently considering is typical.

“The Union, as you know, maintains a General Survey Corps whose task it is to map the galaxy, surveying such planets as harbor alien races or seem suitable for human colonization. Such a survey team, for example, first established contact between your people and ours. Exchange observation rights are worked out, and representatives of both races are given the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the society of the other.

“In the case of unoccupied, habitable planets, however, the state’s function ceases with the filing of a complete and definitive survey at the Under-Ministry for Emigration. The state, as a state, sponsors no colonies and makes no establishments except for the few staging bases which are maintained for the use of the Survey Corps. We have not yet found any need for the institution of an offensive service analogous to a planetary army, nor do we expect to. War in space is possible only under extraordinary conditions, and we foresee no such contingency.

“All our colonization is carried out by private citizens who apply to Mr. Mead, here, for options on suitable unoccupied planets. Mr. Mead’s function is to act as a consultant in these cases. He maintains a roster of surveyed human-habitable planets, and either simply assigns the requested planet or recommends one to fit specified conditions. The cost of the option is sufficient to cover the administrative effort

involved, together with sufficient profit to the government to finance further surveys.

“The individual holding the option is then referred to Emigration, which provides copies of a prospectus taken from the General Survey report, and advertises the option holder’s asking prices on subdivisions. Again, there is a reasonable fee of a nature similar to ours, devoted to the same purposes.

“The state then ceases to have any voice in the projected colonization whatsoever. It is a totally private enterprise—a simple real estate operation, if you will, with the state acting only as an advertising agency, and, occasionally, as the lessor of suitable transportation from Earth to the new planet. The colonists, of course, are under our protection, maintaining full citizenship unless they request independence, which is freely granted.

“If you would like to see it for purposes of clarification, you’re welcome to examine our file on Martin Holliday, a citizen who is fairly typical of these real estate operators, and who has just filed an option on his second planet.” Smiling, Marlowe extended the folder.

“Thank you, I should like to,” ud Klavan said, and took the file from Marlowe. He leafed through it rapidly, pausing, after asking Marlowe’s leave, to make notes on some of the information, and then handed it back.

“Most interesting,” ud Klavan observed. “However, if you’ll enlighten me—This man, Martin Holliday; wouldn’t there seem to be very little incentive for him, considering his age, even if there is the expectation of a high monetary return? Particularly since his first attempt, while not a failure, was not an outstanding financial success?”

Marlowe shrugged helplessly. “I tend to agree with you thoroughly, ud Klavan, but—” he smiled, “you’ll agree, I’m sure, that one Earthman’s boredom is another’s incentive? We are not a rigorously logical race, ud Klavan.”

“Quite,” the Dovenilid replied.

V

Marlowe stared at his irrevocable clock. His interphone light flickered, and he touched the switch absently.

“Yes, Mary?”

“Will there be anything else, Mr. Secretary?”

“No, thank you, Mary. Good night.”

“Good night, sir.”

There was no appeal. The day was over, and he had to go home.

He stared helplessly at his empty office, his mind automatically counting the pairs of departing footsteps that sounded momentarily as clerks and stenographers crossed the walk below his partly-open window. Finally he rolled his chair back and pushed himself to his feet. Disconsolate, he moved irresolutely to the window and watched the people leave.

Washington—aging, crowded Washington, mazed by narrow streets, carrying the burden of the severe, unimaginative past on its grimy architecture—respired heavily under the sinking sun.

The capital ought to be moved, he thought as he'd thought every night at this time. Nearer the heart of the empire. Out of this steamy bog. Out of this warren.

His heavy lips moved into an ironical comment on his own thoughts. No one was ever going to move the empire's traditional seat. There was too much nostalgia concentrated here, along with the humidity. Some day, when the Union was contiguous with the entire galaxy, men would still call Washington, on old, out-of-the-way Earth, their capital. Man was not a rigorously logical race, as a race.

The thought of going home broke out afresh, insidiously avoiding the barriers of bemusement which he had tried to erect, and he turned abruptly away from the window,

moving decisively so as to be able to move at all. He yanked open a desk drawer and stuffed his jacket pockets with candy bars, ripping the film from one and chewing on its end while he put papers in his brief case.

Finally, he could not delay any longer. Everyone else was out of the building, and the robots were taking over. Metal treads spun along the corridors, bearing brooms, and the robot switchboards guarded the communications of the Ministry. Soon the char-robots would be bustling into this very office. He sighed and walked slowly out, down the empty halls where no human eye could see him waddling.

He stepped into his car, and as he opened the door the automatic recording said “Home, please,” in his own voice. The car waited until he was settled and then accelerated gently, pointing for his apartment.

The recording had been an unavoidable but vicious measure of his own. He’d had to resort to it, for the temptation to drive to a terminal, to an airport, or rocket field, or railroad station—*anywhere*—had become excruciating.

The car stopped for a pedestrian light, and a sports model bounced jauntily to a stop beside it. The driver cocked an eyebrow at Marlowe and chuckled. “Say, Fatso, which one of you’s the Buick?” Then the light changed, the car sputtered away, and left Marlowe cringing.

He would not get an official car and protect himself with its license number. He would not be a coward. He *would* not!

His fingers shaking, he tore the film from another candy bar.

Marlowe huddled in his chair, the notebook clamped on one broad thigh by his heavy hand, his lips mumbling nervously while his pencil-point checked off meter.

“Dwell in aching discontent,” he muttered. “No. Not that.” He stared down at the floor, his eyes distant.

“Bitter discontent,” he whispered. He grunted softly with breath that had to force its way past the constricting weight of his hunched chest. “Bitter dwell.” He crossed out the third line, substituted the new one, and began to read the first two verses to himself.

“We are born of Humankind—
This our destiny:
To bitter dwell in discontent
Wherever we may be.

“To strangle with the burden
Of that which heels us on.
To stake our fresh beginnings
When frailer breeds have done.”

He smiled briefly, content. It still wasn't perfect, but it was getting closer. He continued:

“To pile upon the ashes
Of races in decease
Such citadels of our kind's own
As fortify no—”

“What are you doing, David?” his wife asked over his shoulder.

Flinching, he pulled the notebook closer into his lap, bending forward in an instinctive effort to protect it.

The warm, loving, sawing voice went on. “Are you writing another poem, David? Why, I thought you'd given that up!”

“It’s... it’s nothing, really, uh... Leonora. Nothing much. Just a... a thing I’ve had running around my head. Wanted to get rid of it.”

His wife leaned over and kissed his cheek clumsily. “Why, you old big dear! I’ll bet it’s for me. Isn’t it, David? Isn’t it for me?”

He shook his head in almost desperate regret. “I’m... I’m afraid not, uh—” Snorer. “It’s about something else, Leonora.”

“Oh.” She came around the chair, and he furtively wiped his cheek with a hasty hand. She sat down facing him, smiling with entreaty. “Would you read it to me anyway, David? Please, dear?”

“Well, it’s not... not finished yet—not right.”

“You don’t have to, David. It’s not important. Not really.” She sighed deeply.

He picked up the notebook, his breath cold in his constricted throat. “All right,” he said, the words coming out huskily, “I’ll read it. But it’s not finished yet.”

“If you don’t want to—”

He began to read hurriedly, his eyes locked on the notebook, his voice a suppressed hoarse, spasmodic whisper.

“Such citadels of our kind’s own
As fortify no peace.

“No wall can offer shelter,
No roof can shield from pain.
We cannot rest; we are the damned;
We must go forth again.

“Unnumbered we must—”

“David, are you sure about those last lines?” She smiled apologetically. “I know I’m old-fashioned, but couldn’t you change that? It seems so... so harsh. And I think you may have unconsciously borrowed it from someone else. I can’t help thinking I’ve heard it before, somewhere? Don’t you think so?”

“I don’t know, dear. You may be right about that word, but it doesn’t really matter, does it? I mean, I’m not going to try to get it published, or anything.”

“I know, dear, but still—”

He was looking at her desperately.

“I’m sorry, dear!” she said contritely. “Please go on. Don’t pay any attention to my stupid comments.”

“They’re not stupid—”

“Please, dear. Go on.”

His fingers clamped on the edge of the notebook.

“Unnumbered we must wander,
Break, and bleed, and die.
Implacable as ocean,
Our tide must drown the sky.

“What is our expiation,
For what primeval crime,
That we must go on marching
Until the crash of time?

“What hand has shaped so cruelly?
What whim has cast such fate?
Where is, in our creation,
The botch that makes us great?”

“Oh, that’s good, darling! That’s very good. I’m proud of you, David.”

“I think it stinks,” he said evenly, “but, anyway, there are two more verses.”

“David!”

Grimly, he spat out the last eight lines.

“Why are we ever gimleted
By empire’s irony?
Is discontent the cancered price
Of Earthman’s galaxy?”

Leonora, recoiling from his cold fury, was a shaking pair of shoulders and a mass of lank hair supported by her hands on her face while she sobbed.

“Are our souls so much perverted?
Can we not relent?
Or are the stars the madman’s cost
For his inborn discontent?”

“Good night, Leonora.”

VI

The light flickered on Marlowe’s interphone.

“Good morning, Mr. Secretary.”

“Good morning, Mary. What’s up?”

“Harrison’s being deported from Dovenil, sir. There’s a civil crime charged against him. Quite a serious one.”

Marlowe’s eyebrows went up. “How much have we got on it?”

“Not too much, sir. Harrison’s report hasn’t come in yet. But the story’s on the news broadcasts now, sir. We haven’t been asked to comment yet, but Emigration has been called by several news outlets, and the Ministry for Education just

called here and inquired whether it would be all right to publish a general statement of their exchange students' careful instructions against violating local customs."

Marlowe's glance brooded down on the mass of papers piled in the tray of his IN box. "Give me a tape of a typical broadcast," he said at last. "Hold everything else. Present explanation to all news outlets: None now, statement forthcoming after preliminary investigation later in the day. The Ministry regrets this incident deeply, and will try to settle matters as soon and as amicably as possible, et cetera, et cetera. OK?"

"Yes, sir."

He swung his chair around to face the screen let into a side wall, and colors began to flicker and run in the field almost immediately. They steadied and sharpened, and the broadcast tape began to roll.

Dateline: Dovenil, Sector Three, Day 183, 2417 G.S.T. Your Topical News reporter on this small planet at the Union's rim was unable today to locate for comment any of the high officials of this alien civilization directly concerned with the order for the deportation of exchange student-observer Hubert Harrison, charged with theft and violent assault on the person of a Dovenilid citizen. Union citizen Harrison was unavailable for comment at this time, but Topical News will present his views and such other clues when more ensues.

Marlowe grunted. Journalese was getting out of hand again. That last rhyming sentence was sure to stick in the audience's brains. It might be only another advertising gimmick, but if they started doing it with the body of the news itself, it might be well to feed Topical enough false

leads to destroy what little reputation for comprehensibility they had left.

He touched his interphone switch.

“Uh... Mary, what was the hooper on that broadcast?”

“Under one percent, sir.”

Which meant that, so far, the Body Politic hadn't reacted.

“Thank you. Is there anything else coming in?”

“Not at the moment, sir.”

“What's—” Cabbage. “What's Dalish ud Klavan doing?”

“His residence is the Solar Hostel, sir. The management reports that he is still in his room, and has not reserved space on any form of long-distance transportation. He has not contacted us, either, and there is a strong probability that he may still be unaware of what's happened.”

“How many calls did he make yesterday, either before or after he was here, and to whom?”

“I can get you a list in ten minutes, sir.”

“Do that, Mary.”

He switched off, sat slapping the edge of his desk with his hand, and switched on again.

“Mary, I want the GenSurvs on the Dovenil area to a depth of ten cubic lights.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And get me Mr. Mead on the phone, please.”

“Yes, sir.”

Marlowe's lips pulled back from his teeth as he switched off. He snatched a candy bar out of his drawer, tore the film part way off, then threw it back in the drawer as his desk phone chimed.

“Here, Chris.”

“Here, Mr. Marlowe.”

“Look, Chris—has Holliday left Earth yet?”

“Yes, sir. Yes, Dave.”

“Where is he?”

“Luna, en route to Karlshaven. He was lucky enough to have me arrange for his accidentally getting a ride on a

GenSurv ship that happened to be going out that way, if you follow me.” Mead grinned.

“Get him back.”

The smile blanked out. “I can’t do that, Mr. Marlowe! He’d never be able to take it. You should have seen him when I put him on the shuttle. We doped him up with EasyRest, and even then his subconscious could *feel* the bulkheads around him, even in his sleep. Those shuttles are small, and they don’t have ports.”

“We can’t help that. We need him, and I’ve got to talk to him first. Personally.”

Mead bit his lip. “Yes, sir.”

“Dave.”

“Yes... Dave.”

VII

Dalish ud Klavan sat easily in his chair opposite Marlowe. He rested one digit on his notebook and waited.

“Ud Klavan,” Marlowe said amiably, “you’re undoubtedly aware by now that your opposite number on Dovenil has been charged with a civil crime and deported.”

The Dovenilid nodded. “An unfortunate incident. One that I regret personally, and which I am sure my own people would much rather not have had happen.”

“Naturally.” Marlowe smiled. “I simply wanted to reassure you that this incident does not reflect on your own status in any way. We are investigating our representative, and will take appropriate action, but it seems quite clear that the fault is not with your people. We have already forwarded reparations and a note of apology to your government. As further reparation, I wish to assure you personally that we

will cooperate with your personal observations in every possible way. If there is anything at all you wish to know—even what might, under ordinary conditions, be considered restricted information—just call on us.”

Ud Klavan’s crest stirred a fraction of an inch, and Marlowe chuckled inwardly. Well, even a brilliant spy might be forgiven an outward display of surprise under these circumstances.

The Dovenilid gave him a piercing look, but Marlowe presented a featureless façade of bulk.

The secretary chuckled in his mind once more. He doubted if ud Klavan could accept the hypothesis that Marlowe did not know he was a spy. But the Dovenilid must be a sorely confused being at this point.

“Thank you, Marlowe,” he said finally. “I am most grateful, and I am sure my people will construe it as yet another sign of the Union’s friendship.”

“I hope so, ud Klavan,” Marlowe replied. Having exchanged this last friendly lie, they went through the customary Dovenilid formula of leave-taking.

Marlowe slapped his interphone switch as soon as the alien was gone. “Uh... Mary, what’s the latest on Holliday?”

“His shuttle lands at Idlewild in half an hour, sir.”

“All right, get Mr. Mead. Have him meet me out front, and get an official car to take us to the field. I’ll want somebody from Emigration to go with us. Call Idlewild and have them set up a desk and chairs for four out in the middle of the field. Call the Ministry for Traffic and make sure that field stays clear until we’re through with it. My Ministerial prerogative, and no backtalk. I want that car in ten minutes.”

“Yes, sir.”

Mary's voice was perfectly even, without the slightest hint that there was anything unusual happening. Marlowe switched off and twisted his mouth.

He picked up the GenSurv on the Dovenil area and began skimming it rapidly.

He kept his eyes carefully front as he walked out of his office, past the battery of clerks in the outer office, and down the hall. He kept them rigidly fixed on the door of his personal elevator which, during the day, was human-operated under the provisions of the Human Employment Act of 2302. He met Mead in front of the building and did not look into the eyes of Bussard, the man from Emigration, as they shook hands. He followed them down the walk in a sweating agony of obliviousness, and climbed into the car with carefully normal lack of haste.

He sat sweating, chewing a candy bar, for several minutes before he spoke. Then, slowly, he felt his battered defenses reassert themselves, and he could actually look at Bussard, before he turned to Mead.

"Now, then," he rapped out a shade too abruptly before he caught himself. "Here's the GenSurv on the Dovenil area, Chris. Anything in it you don't know already?"

"I don't think so, sir."

"OK, dig me up a habitable planet—even a long-term False-E will do—close to Dovenil, but not actually in their system. If it's at all possible, I want that world in a system without any rich planets. And I don't want any rich systems anywhere near it. If you can't do that, arrange for the outright sale of all mineral and other resource rights to suitable companies. I want that planet to be habitable, but I want it to be impossible for any people on it to get at enough resources to achieve a technological culture. Can do?"

Mead shook his head. "I don't know."

"You've got about fifteen minutes to find out. I'm going to start talking to Holliday, and when I tell him I've got another planet for him, I'll be depending on you to furnish one. Sorry to pile it on like this, but must be."

Mead nodded. "Right, Mr. Marlowe. That's why I draw pay."

"Good boy. Now, uh—" Rabbit. "Bussard. I want you to be ready to lay out a complete advertising and prospectus program. Straight routine work, but about four times normal speed. The toughest part of it will be following the lead that Chris and I set. Don't be surprised at anything, and act like it happens every day."

"Yes, Mr. Marlowe."

"Right."

Bussard looked uncomfortable. "Ah... Mr. Marlowe?"

"Yes?"

"About this man, Harrison. I presume all this is the result of what happened to him on Dovenil. Do you think there's any foundation in truth for what they say he did? Or do you think it's just an excuse to get him off their world?"

Marlowe looked at him coldly. "Don't be an ass," he snorted.

VIII

Martin Holliday climbed slowly out of the shuttle's lock and moved fumblingly down the stairs, leaning on the attendant's arm. His face was a mottled gray, and his hands shook uncontrollably. He stepped down to the tarmac and his head turned from side to side as his eyes gulped the field's distances.

Marlowe sat behind the desk that had been put down in the middle of this emptiness, his eyes brooding as he looked at Holliday. Bussard stood beside him, trying nervously to appear noncommittal, while Mead went up to the shaking old man, grasped his hand, and brought him over to the desk.

Marlowe shifted uncomfortably. The desk was standard size, and he had to sit far away from it. He could not feel at ease in such a position.

His thick fingers went into the side pocket of his jacket and peeled the film off a candy bar, and he began to eat it, holding it in his left hand, as Mead introduced Holliday.

“How do you do, Mr. Holliday?” Marlowe said, his voice higher than he would have liked it, while he shook the man’s hand.

“I’m... I’m pleased to meet you, Mr. Secretary,” Holliday replied. His eyes were darting past Marlowe’s head.

“This is Mr. Bussard, of Emigration, and you know Mr. Mead, of course. Now, I think we can all sit down.”

Mead’s chair was next to Holliday’s, and Bussard’s was to one side of the desk, so that only Marlowe, unavoidably, blocked his complete view of the stretching tarmac.

“First of all, Mr. Holliday, I’d like to thank you for coming back. Please believe me when I say we would not have made such a request if it were not urgently necessary.”

“It’s all right,” Holliday said in a low, apologetic voice. “I don’t mind.”

Marlowe winced, but he had to go on.

“Have you seen a news broadcast recently, Mr. Holliday?”

The man shook his head in embarrassment. “No, sir. I’ve been... asleep most of the time.”

“I understand, Mr. Holliday. I didn’t really expect you had under the circumstances. The situation is this:

“Some time ago, our survey ships, working out in their usual expanding pattern, encountered an alien civilization on a world designated Moore II on our maps, and which the

natives call Dovenil. It was largely a routine matter, no different from any other alien contact which we've had. They had a relatively high technology, embracing the beginnings of interplanetary flight, and our contact teams were soon able to work out a diplomatic status mutually satisfactory to both.

"Social observers were exchanged, in accordance with the usual practice, and everything seemed to be going well."

Holliday nodded out of painful politeness, not seeing the connection with himself. Some of his nervousness was beginning to fade, but it was impossible for him to be really at ease with so many people near him, with all of Earth's billions lurking at the edge of the tarmac.

"However," Marlowe went on as quickly as he could, "today, our representative was deported on a trumped-up charge. Undoubtedly, this is only the first move in some complicated scheme directed against the Union. What it is, we do not yet know, but further observation of the actions of their own representative on this planet has convinced us that they are a clever, ruthless people, living in a society which would have put Machiavelli to shame. They are single-minded of purpose, and welded into a tight group whose major purpose in life is the service of the state in its major purpose, which, by all indications, is that of eventually dominating the universe.

"You know our libertarian society. You know that the Union government is almost powerless, and that the Union itself is nothing but a loose federation composed of a large number of independent nations tied together by very little more than the fact that we are all Earthmen.

"We are almost helpless in the face of such a nation as the Dovenilids. They have already outmaneuvered us once, despite our best efforts. There is no sign that they will not be able to do so again, at will.

"We must, somehow, discover what the Dovenilids intend to do next. For this reason, I earnestly request that you

accept our offer of another planet than the one you have optioned, closer to the Dovenilid system. We are willing, under these extraordinary circumstances, to consider your credit sufficient for the outright purchase of half the planet, and Mr. Bussard, here, will do his utmost to get you suitable colonists for the other half as rapidly as it can be done. Will you help us, Mr. Holliday?"

Marlowe sank back in his chair. He became conscious of a messy feeling in his left hand, and looked down to discover the half-eaten candy bar had melted. He tried furtively to wipe his hand clean on the underside of the desk, but he knew Bussard had noticed, and he cringed and cursed himself.

Holliday's face twisted nervously.

"I... I don't know—"

"Please don't misunderstand us, Mr. Holliday," Marlowe said. "We do not intend to ask you to spy for us, nor are we acting with the intention of now establishing a base of any sort on the planet. We simply would like to have a Union world near the Dovenilid system. Whatever Dovenil does will not have gathered significant momentum by the end of your life. You will be free to end your days exactly as you have always wished, and the precautions we have outlined will ensure that there will be no encroachments on your personal property during that time. We are planning for the next generation, when Dovenil will be initiating its program of expansion. It is then that we will need an established outpost near their borders."

"Yes," Holliday said hesitantly, "I can understand that. I... I don't know," he repeated. "It seems all right. And, as you say, it won't matter, during my lifetime, and it's more than I had really hoped for." He looked nervously at Mead. "What

do you think, Mr. Mead? You've always done your best for me."

Mead shot one quick glance at Marlowe. "I think Mr. Marlowe's doing his best for the Union," he said finally, "and I know he is fully aware of your personal interests. I think what he's doing is reasonable under the circumstances, and I think his proposition to you, as he's outlined it, is something which you cannot afford to not consider. The final decision is up to you, of course."

Holliday nodded slowly, staring down at his hands. "Yes, yes, I think you're right, Mr. Mead." He looked up at Marlowe. "I'll be glad to help. And I'm grateful for the consideration you've shown me."

"Not at all, Mr. Holliday. The Union is in your debt."

Marlowe wiped his hand on the underside of the desk again, but he only made matters worse, for his fingers picked up some of the chocolate he had removed before.

"Mr. Mead, will you give Mr. Holliday the details on the new planet?" he said, trying to get his handkerchief out without smearing his suit. He could almost hear Bussard snickering.

Holliday signed the new option contract and shook Marlowe's hand. "I'd like to thank you again, sir. Looking at it from my point of view, it's something for nothing—at least, while I'm alive. And it's a very nice planet, too, from the way Mr. Mead described it. Even better than Karlshaven."

"Nevertheless, Mr. Holliday," Marlowe said, "you have done the Union a great service. We would consider it an honor if you allowed us to enter your planet in our records under the name of Holliday."

He kept his eyes away from Mead.

Martin Holliday's eyes were shining. "Thank you, Mr. Marlowe," he said huskily.

Marlowe could think of no reply. Finally, he simply nodded. "It's been a pleasure meeting you, Mr. Holliday. We've arranged transportation, and your shuttle will be taking off very shortly."

Holliday's face began to bead with fresh perspiration at the thought of bulkheads enclosing him once more, but he managed to smile, and then ask, hesitantly: "May I... may I wait for the shuttle out here, sir?"

"Certainly. We'll arrange for that. Well, goodbye, Mr. Holliday."

"Goodbye, Mr. Marlowe. Goodbye, Mr. Bussard. And goodbye, Mr. Mead. I don't suppose you'll be seeing me again."

"Good luck, Mr. Holliday," Mead said.

Marlowe twisted awkwardly on the car's back seat, wiping futilely at the long smear of chocolate on his trouser pocket.

Well, he thought, at least he'd given the old man his name on the star maps until Earthmen stopped roving.

At least he'd given him that.

Mead was looking at him. "I don't suppose we've got time to let him die in peace, have we?" he asked.

Marlowe shook his head.

"I suppose we'll have to start breaking him immediately, won't we?"

Marlowe nodded.

"I'll get at it right away, sir."

Dave! Does everyone have to hate me? Can't anyone understand? Even you, uh—Creed. Even you, Mead?

Dalish ud Klavan, stooped and withered, sat hopelessly, opposite Marlowe, who sat behind his desk like a grizzled polar bear, his thinning mane of white hair unkempt and straggling.

“Marlowe, my people are strangling,” the old Dovenilid said.

Marlowe looked at him silently.

“The Holliday Republic has signed treaty after treaty with us, and still their citizens raid our mining planets, driving away our own people, stealing the resources we must have if we are to live.”

Marlowe sighed. “There’s nothing I can do.”

“We have gone to the Holliday government repeatedly,” ud Klavan pleaded. “They tell us the raiders are criminals, that they are doing their best to stop them. But they still buy the metal the raiders bring them.”

“They have to,” Marlowe said. “There are no available resources anywhere within practicable distances. If they’re to have any civilization at all, they’ve *got* to buy from the outlaws.”

“But they are members of the Union!” ud Klavan protested. “*Why* won’t you do anything to stop them?”

“We can’t,” Marlowe said again. “They’re members of the Union, yes, but they’re also a free republic. We have no administrative jurisdiction over them, and if we attempted to establish one our citizens would rise in protest all over our territory.”

“Then we’re finished. Dovenil is a dead world.”

Marlowe nodded slowly. “I am very sorry. If there is anything I can do, or that the Ministry can do, we will do it. But we cannot save the Dovenilid state.”

Ud Klavan looked at him bitterly. “Thank you,” he said. “Thank you for your generous offer of a gracious funeral.”

“I don’t understand you!” he burst out suddenly. “I don’t understand you people! Diplomatic lies, yes. Expediency, yes! But this... this madness, this fanatical, illogical

devotion of the state in the cause of a people who will tolerate no state! This... no, this I cannot understand.”

Marlowe looked at him, his eyes full of years.

“Ud Klavan,” he said, “you are quite right. We are a race of maniacs. And that is why Earthmen rule the galaxy. For our treaties are not binding, and our promises are worthless. Our government does *not* represent our people. It represents our people as they once were. The delay in the democratic process is such that the treaty signed today fulfills the promise of yesterday—but today the Body Politic has formed a new opinion, is following a new logic which is completely at variance with that of yesterday. An Earthman’s promise—expressed in words or deeds—is good *only at the instant he makes it*. A second later, new factors have entered into the total circumstances, and a new chain of logic has formed in his head—to be altered again, a few seconds later.”

He thought, suddenly, of that poor claustrophobic devil, Holliday, harried from planet to planet, never given a moment’s rest—and civilizing, civilizing, spreading the race of humankind wherever he was driven. Civilizing with a fervor no hired dummy could have accomplished, driven by his fear to sell with all the real estate agent’s talent that had been born in him, selling for the sake of money with which to buy that land he needed for his peace—and always being forced to sell a little too much.

Ud Klavan rose from his chair. “You are also right, Marlowe. You are a race of maniacs, gibbering across the stars. And know, Marlowe, that the other races of the universe hate you.”

Marlowe with a tremendous effort heaved himself out of his chair.

“Hate us?” He lumbered around the desk and advanced on the frightened Dovenilid, who was retreating backwards before his path.

“Can’t you see it? Don’t you understand that, if we are to pursue any course of action over a long time—if we are ever

going to achieve a galaxy in which an Earthman can some day live at peace with himself—we must each day violate all the moral codes and creeds which we held inviolate the day before? That we must fight against every ideal, every principle which our fathers taught us, because they no longer apply to our new logic?

“*You* hate us!” He thrust his fat hand, its nails bitten down to the quick and beyond, in front of the cringing alien’s eyes.

“You poor, weak, single-minded, ineffectual thing! We hate ourselves!”

THE BARBARIANS

It was just as he saw the Barbarian's squat black tankette lurch hurriedly into a nest of boulders that young Giulion Geoffrey realized he had been betrayed. With the muzzle of his own cannon still hot from the shell that had jammed the Barbarian's turret, he had yanked the starboard track lever to wheel into position for the finishing shot. All around him, the remnants of the Barbarian's invading army were being cut to flaming ribbons by the armored vehicles of the Seaboard League. The night was shot through by billows of cannon fire, and the din of laboring engines, guns, and rent metal was a cacophonous climax to the Seaboard League's first decisive victory over the inland invaders. Young Geoffrey could justifiably feel that he would cap that climax by personally accounting for the greatest of the inland barbarians; the barbarian general himself. He trained his sights on the scarlet bearpaw painted on the skewed turret's flank, and laid his hand on the firing lever.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of another tankette rushing up on his port side. He glanced at it, saw its graceful handcrafting, and knew it for one of the League's own. He could even see the insigne; the mailed heel trampling a stand of wheat; Harolde Dugald, of the neighboring fief. Geoffrey was on coldly polite terms with Dugald—he had no use for the other man's way of treating his serfs—and now he felt a prickle of indignant rage at this attempt to usurp a share of his glory. He saw Dugald's turret begin to traverse, and hastily tried to get the finishing shot

into the Barbarian's tankette before the other Leaguesman could fire. But Dugald was not aiming for the Barbarian. First he had to eliminate Geoffrey from the scene entirely. When he fired, at almost point-blank range, the world seemed to explode in Giulion's eyes.

Somehow, no whistling shard of metal actually hit him. But the tankette, sturdy as it was, could not hope to protect him entirely. He was thrown viciously into the air, his ribs first smashing into the side of the hatch, and then he was thrown clear, onto the rocky ground of the foothills; agonized, stunned to semi-consciousness, he lay feebly beating at his smoldering tunic while Dugald spun viciously by him, almost crushing him under one tread. He saw Dugald's tankette plunge into the rocks after the Barbarian, and then, suddenly, the battle was beyond him. Dugald, the Barbarian; all the thundering might that had clashed here on the eastern seaboard of what had, long ago, been the United States of America—all of this had suddenly, as battles will, whirled off in a new direction and left Giulion Geoffrey to lie hurt and unconscious in the night.

He awoke to the trickle of cold water between his teeth. His lips bit into the threaded metal of a canteen top, and a huge arm supported his shoulders. Broad shoulders and a massive head loomed over him against the stars. A rumbling, gentle voice said: "All right, lad, now swallow some before it's all wasted."

He peered around him in the night. It was as still as the bottom of a grave. Nothing moved. He drew a ragged breath that ended in a sharp gasp, and the rumbling voice said: "Ribs?"

He nodded and managed a strangled "Yes."

"Shouldn't wonder," the stranger grunted. "I saw you pop out of your tank like a cork coming out of a wine bottle. That

was a fair shot he hit you. You're lucky." A broad hand pressed him down as the memory of Dugald's treachery started him struggling to his feet. "Hold still, lad. We'll give you a chance to catch your breath and wrap some bandages around you. You'll live to give him his due, but not tonight. You'll have to wait for another day."

There was something in the stranger's voice that Geoffrey recognized for the quality that made men obey other men. It was competence, self-assurance, and, even more, the calm expression of good sense. Tonight, Geoffrey needed someone with that quality. He sank back, grateful for the stranger's help. "I'm Giulion Geoffrey of Geoffrion," he said, "and indebted to you. Who are you, stranger?"

The darkness rumbled to a deep, rueful laugh. "In these parts, lad, I'm not called by my proper name. I'm Hodd Savage—the Barbarian. And that was a fair knock *you* gave *me*."

Young Geoffrey's silence lasted for a long while. Then he said in a flat, distant voice: "Why did you give me water, if you're going to kill me anyway?"

The Barbarian laughed again, this time in pure amusement. "Because I'm not going to kill you, obviously. You're too good a cannoneer to be despatched by a belt knife. No—no, lad, I'm not planning to kill anyone for some time. All I want right now is to get out of here and get home. I've got another army to raise, to make up for this pasting you Leaguesmen have just given me."

"Next time, you won't be so lucky," Geoffrey muttered. "We'll see your hide flapping in the rain, if you're ever foolish enough to raid our lands again."

The Barbarian slapped his thigh. "By God," he chuckled, "I knew it wasn't some ordinary veal-fed princeling that outmaneuvered *me*!" He shook his head. "That other pup had better watch out for you, if you ever cross his path again. I lost him in the rocks with ease to spare. Bad luck your shot smashed my fuel tanks, or I'd be halfway home by

now." The rolling voice grew low and bitter. "No sense waiting to pick up my men. Not enough of 'em left to make a corporal's guard."

"What do you mean, *if* I ever cross Dugald's path again? I'll have him called out to trial by combat the day I can ride a tankette once more."

"I wouldn't be too sure, lad," the Barbarian said gently. "What does that look like, over there?"

Geoffrey turned his head to follow the shadowy pointing arm, and saw a flicker of light in the distance. He recognized it for what it was; a huge campfire, with the Leaguesmen's tankettes drawn up around it. "They're dividing the spoils—what prisoners there are, to work the mills; whatever of your equipment is still usable; your baggage train. And so forth. What of it?"

"Ah, yes, my baggage train," the Barbarian muttered. "Well, we'll come back to that. What else do you suppose they're dividing?"

Geoffrey frowned. "Why—nothing else. Wait!" He sat up sharply, ignoring his ribs. "The fiefs of the dead nobles."

"Exactly. Your ramshackle little League held together long enough to whip us for the first time, but now the princelings are dividing up and returning to their separate holdings. Once there, they'll go back to peering covetously at each other's lands, and maybe raid amongst themselves a little, until I come back again. And you're as poor as a church mouse at this moment, lad—no fief, no lands, no title—unless there's an heir?"

Geoffrey shook his head distractedly. "No. I've not wed. It's as you say."

"And just try to get your property back. No—no, it won't be so easy to return. Unless you'd care to be a serf on your own former holding?"

"Dugald would have me killed," Geoffrey said bitterly.

"So there you are, lad. The only advantage you have is that Dugald thinks you're dead already—you can be sure of

that, or it would have been an assassin, and not me, that woke you. That's something, at least. It's a beginning, but you'll have to lay your plans carefully, and take your time. I certainly wouldn't plan on doing anything until your body's healed and your brain's had time to work."

Young Geoffrey blinked back the tears of rage. The thought of losing the town and lands his father had left him was almost more than his hot blood could stand. The memory of the great old Keep that dominated the town, with its tapestried halls and torchlit chambers, was suddenly very precious to him. He felt a sharp pang at the thought that he must sleep in a field tonight, like some skulking outlaw, while Dugald quite possibly got himself drunk on Geoffrion wine and snored his headache away on the thick furs of Geoffrey's bed.

But the Barbarian was right. Time was needed—and this meant that, to a certain extent at least, his lot and Savage's were thrown in together. The thought came to Geoffrey that he might have chosen a worse partner.

"Now, lad," the Barbarian said, "as long as you're not doing anything else, you might as well help me with my problem."

The realization of just exactly who this man was came sharply back to young Geoffrey. "I won't help you escape to your own lands, if that's what you mean," he said quickly.

"I'll take good care of that myself, when the time comes," the man answered drily. "Right now, I've got something else in mind. They're dividing my baggage train, as you said. Now, I don't mind that, seeing as most of it belonged to them in the first place. I don't mind it for this year, that is. But there's something else one of you cockerels will be wanting to take home with him, and I've a mind not to let him. There's a perfectly good woman in my personal trailer, and I'm going to get her. But if we're going to do that and get clear of this country by morning, we'd better get to it."

Like every other young man of his time and place, Geoffrey had a clear-cut sense of duty regarding the safety and well-being of ladies. He had an entirely different set of attitudes toward women who were not ladies. He had not the slightest idea of which to apply to this case.

What sort of woman would the Barbarian take to battle with him? What sort of women would the inland barbarians have generally? He had very little knowledge to go on. The inlanders had been appearing from over the westward mountains for generations, looting and pillaging almost at will, sometimes staying through a winter but usually disappearing in the early Fall, carrying their spoils back to their mysterious homelands on the great Mississippi plain. The seaboard civilization had somehow kept from going to its knees, in spite of them—in this last generation, even though the barbarians had the Barbarian to lead them, the Seaboard League had managed to cobble itself together—but no one, in all this time, had ever actually learned, or cared, much about these vicious, compactly organized raiders. Certainly no one had learned anything beyond those facts which worked to best advantage on a battlefield.

So, young Giulion Geoffrey faced his problem. This “perfectly good woman” of the Barbarian’s—was she in fact a good woman, a lady, and therefore entitled to aid in extremity from any and all gentlemen; or was she some camp follower, entirely worthy of being considered a spoil of combat?

“Well, come on, lad,” the Barbarian rumbled impatiently at this point. “Do you want that Dugald enjoying *her* tonight along with everything else?”

And that decided Geoffrey. He pushed himself to his feet, not liking the daggers in his chest, but not liking the thought of Dugald’s pleasures even more. “Let’s go, then.”

“Good enough, lad,” the Barbarian chuckled. “Now let’s see how quietly we can get across to the edge of that fire.”

They set out—none too quietly, with the Barbarian’s heavy bulk lurching against Geoffrey’s lean shoulder on occasion, and both of them uncertain of their footing in the darkness. But they made it across without being noticed—just two more battle-sore figures in a field where many such might be expected—and that was what counted.

The noise and confusion attendant on the dividing of the spoils was an added help; they reached the fringes of the campfire easily.

It was very interesting, the way history had doubled back on itself, like a worm regrowing part of its body but regrowing it in the wrong place. At one end of the kink—of the fresh, pink scar—was a purulent hell of fire and smoke that no one might have expected to live through. Yet, people had, as they have a habit of doing. And at the other end of the kink in time—Giulion Geoffrey’s end, Harolde Dugald’s time, the Barbarian’s day—there were keeps and moats in Erie, Pennsylvania, vassals in New Brunswick, and a great stinking warren of low, half-timbered houses on the island of Manhattan. If it had taken a few centuries longer to recover from the cauterizing sun bombs, these things might still have been. But they might have had different names, and human history might have been considered to begin only a few hundred years before. Even this had not happened. The link with the past remained. There was a narrow, cobbled path on Manhattan, with sewage oozing down the ditch in its center, which was still Fifth Avenue. It ran roughly along the same directions as old Broadway, not because there was no one who could read the yellowed old maps but because surveying was in its second childhood. There was a barge running between two ropes stretched across the Hudson, and this was the George Washington Bridge ferry. So, it was only a kink in history, not a break.

But Rome was not rebuilt in a day. Hodd Savage—the Barbarian, the man who had come out of the hinterlands to batter on civilization’s badly mortared walls—clamped his hand on Giulion Geoffrey’s arm, grunted, jerked his head toward the cluster of nobles standing beside the campfire, and muttered: “Listen.”

Geoffrey listened.

The nobles were between him and the fire, and almost none of them were more than silhouettes. Here and there, a man faced toward the fire at such an angle that Geoffrey could make out the thick arch of an eyebrow, the jut of a cheek, or the crook of a nose. But it was not enough for recognition. All the nobles were dressed in battle accoutrements that had become stained or torn. Their harness had shifted, their tunics were askew, and they were bunched so closely that the outline of one man blended into the mis-shaped shadow of the next. The voices were hoarse from an afternoon’s bellowing. Some were still drunk with the acid fire of exhausted nerves, and were loud. Others, drained, mumbled in the background like a chorus of the stupid. Gesticulating, mumbling, shouting, shadowed, lumped into one knot of blackness lighted by a ruddy cheekbone here, a gleaming brow there above an eye socket as inky and blank as a bottomless pit, they were like something out of the wan and misty ages before the Earth had had time to form completely.

Two arguing voices rose out of the mass:

“Those three barbarian tankettes are *mine*, I say!”

“Yours when I lie dead!”

“They surrendered to me!”

“Because I pounded them into submission.”

“Into submission, indeed! You skulked around their flanks like a lame dog, and now that I’ve taken them, you want your bone!”

“You were glad enough to see me there when the battle was hot. Call me a dog again and I’ll spit you like a rat on a

pitchfork.”

No one else in the group of nobles paid the two of them any attention. No one had time to spare for any quarrel but his own, and the whole squabbling pile of them looked ready to fly apart at any moment—to draw sidearms and knives and flare into spiteful combat.

The Barbarian spat quietly. “There’s your Seaboard League, lad. There’s your convocation of free men. Step out there and ask for your lands back. Care to try?”

“We’ve already decided that wouldn’t be wise,” Geoffrey said irritably. He had never cared much for these inevitable aftermaths to battle, but it made him angry to have an inland barbarian make pointed comments. “I suppose it’s different when *you* win, eh?”

“Not very. But then, we’re not civilized. Let’s get moving, lad.”

Silently, they skirted the fire and made their way toward the parked vehicles of the Barbarian’s captured supply train. The ground was rough and covered by underbrush. More than once, the Barbarian stumbled into Geoffrey, making him clench his jaw against the pain in his chest. But he saw no point in saying anything about it.

“There she is,” the Barbarian said in a husky growl. Geoffrey peered through the brush at an armored trailer whose flat sides were completely undecorated except for a scarlet bearpaw painted on the door. A lantern gleamed behind the slit windows, and the Barbarian grunted with satisfaction. “She’s still in there. Fine. We’ll have this done in a couple of seconds.”

In spite of the incongruity, Geoffrey asked curiously: “What’s a second?”

“A division of time, lad—one sixtieth of a minute.”

“Oh. What on Earth would you want to measure that accurately for?”

“For getting women out of trailers in a hurry, lad. Now—let’s look for sentries.”

There were two guarding the trailer—men-at-arms from Dugald’s holding, Geoffrey noticed—carrying shotguns and lounging in the shadows. One of them had a wineskin—Geoffrey heard the gurgle plainly—and the other was constantly turning away from the trailer to listen to the shrieks and shouting coming from among the other vehicles of the train, where other guards were not being quite as careful of their masters’ new property.

“I see they’ve found the quartermaster’s wagons,” the Barbarian said drily. “Now, then, lad—you work away toward the right, there, and I’ll take the left. Here—take my knife. I won’t need it.” The Barbarian passed over a length of steel as big as a short-sword, but oddly curved and sharpened down one side of the blade. “Stab if you can, but if you have to cut, that blade’ll go through a man’s forearm. Remember you’re not holding one of those overgrown daggers of yours.”

“And just why should I kill a man for you?”

“Do you think that man won’t try to kill you?”

Geoffrey had no satisfactory answer to that. He moved abruptly off into the brush, holding the Barbarian’s knife, and wondering just how far he was obligated for a bandaged chest and half a pint of water. But a man’s duty to his rescuer was plain enough, and, besides, just what else was there to do?

The blame for it all went squarely back to Dugald, and Geoffrey did not love him for it. He slipped through the bushes until he was only a few yards from the man who had the wineskin, and waited for the Barbarian to appear at the opposite end of the trailer.

When it happened, it happened quite suddenly, as these things will. One moment the other sentry was craning his neck for another look at what was going on elsewhere. The next he was down on his knees, croaking through a

compressed throat, with the Barbarian's arm under his chin and a driving knee ready to smash at the back of his neck again.

Geoffrey jumped forward, toward his own man. The man-at-arms had dropped his wineskin in surprise and was staring at what was happening to his comrade. When he heard Geoffrey come out of the underbrush, the face he turned was white and oddly distended with shock, as though all the bones had drained out of it. He might have appeared fierce enough, ordinarily. But things were happening too fast for him.

Geoffrey had never killed anyone but a noble in his life. Not intentionally and at close range, in any case. The completely baffled and helpless look of this one somehow found time to remind him that this was not, after all, one of his peers—that the man was hopelessly outclassed in fair combat—or in anything else, for that matter. Geoffrey did *not* stop to weigh the probity of this idea. It was the central tenet of his education and environment. Furthermore, there was some truth in it.

He couldn't kill the man. He swept up his arm and struck the flat of the Barbarian's broad knife against the side of the guard's head, and bowled the man over with his rush. But the guard had a hard skull. He stared up with glazed but conscious eyes, and squalled: "Lord Geoffrey!" Geoffrey hit him again, and this time the guard stayed down, but the damage was done. Scrambling to his feet, Geoffrey ran over to the Barbarian, who was letting the other guard ooze to the ground.

"We'll have to hurry!" Geoffrey panted. "Before that man comes back to his senses."

The Barbarian gave him a disgusted look, but nodded. "Hurry we shall." He lurched to the trailer door and slapped it with the flat of his hand. "Let's go, Myka."

There was a scrambling sound inside the trailer, and the light went out. The door slid open, and Geoffrey found

himself staring at the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

She was lithe almost to the point of boyishness, even though she was clearly some years older than Geoffrey. She had short hair the color of hammered copper, high cheekbones, and tawny eyes. She was wearing a tunic and short trousers, and there was an empty pistol holster strapped around her waist. Obviously, she was not a lady. But it was much too late for Geoffrey to care about that. She stopped in the doorway, shaking her head slowly at the Barbarian. "I swear, Hodd," she said in a low, laughing voice, "one of these days you *won't* come back from the dead, and I'll be surprised."

"It was close enough, this time," the Barbarian growled. He jerked his head toward Geoffrey. "That young buck over there knows how to handle his enemies. Once he learns what to do about his friends, I may have to retire."

Myka arched her burning eyebrows. "Oh? What's the story behind that, I'd like to know."

"We can always talk," Geoffrey said a little edgily. "But we can't always find an empty tankette."

"Quite right, lad," the Barbarian said. "I saw some vehicles parked over that way."

"Those belong to the nobles. There ought to be some captured ones of yours somewhere around here."

"With plenty of guards on them. No, thanks."

"That didn't trouble you earlier."

"Myka, as you may have noticed, is more than a tank. This time the prize isn't worth it. I'd rather just slip over to where I can get transportation for the choosing."

"Not with my help."

The Barbarian looked at him and grunted. He seemed oddly disappointed. "I would have bet the other way," he muttered. Then the shaggy head rose, and he circled Myka's waist with one arm. "All right, I'll do it without your help."

“Is Myka trained to drive a tankette and fight at the same time?”

“No.”

“Then you’d better do it my way. You’d make a poor showing, kicking drive levers with a broken leg.” Geoffrey nodded toward the Barbarian’s right shin. “It’s been that way since before you picked me up, hasn’t it? I saw it wobble when you kneed that man-at-arms.”

Myka looked at the Barbarian sharply, worry on her face, but the man was chuckling. “All right, bucko, we’ll do it your way.”

“Fine.” Geoffrey wasn’t so sure it was. Suddenly he was committed not only to helping the Barbarian escape, but also to escape with him. He was faintly surprised at himself. But there was something about the man. Something worth saving, no matter what. And there was the business now of having been recognized. Once Dugald learned he was still alive, there would be a considerable amount of danger in staying in the vicinity. Of course, he had only to stoop over the unconscious guard with the Barbarian’s knife....

With a quick motion, he tossed the weapon back to its owner.

That one was an easy choice, Geoffrey thought. Simply stealing—or was it recapturing?—a tankette and using it to drive away with Myka and the Barbarian didn’t mean he had to go all the way to the barbarian lands with them. Let the guard revive and run to Dugald with the news. All Geoffrey had to do was to remove himself a few miles, find shelter, and bide his time.

One recaptured barbarian tankette might not even be missed. And the guard might not be believed—well, that was a thin hope—but, in any case, no one had any reason to suspect the Barbarian was still alive. There’d be no general pursuit.

Well... maybe not. There was a man-at-arms choked to death, by a stronger arm than Geoffrey’s, and it was the

Barbarian's woman who would be missing. There might be quite a buzz about that.

Geoffrey shook his head in impatient annoyance. This kind of life demanded a great deal more thinking than he was accustomed to. All these unpredictable factors made a man's head spin.

And then again, maybe they didn't. The thing to do was to act, to do what would get him out of here now, and leave him free tomorrow to do whatever thinking tomorrow demanded. With a little practice, too, thinking would undoubtedly come more easily.

"All right," he said decisively, "let's get moving over in that direction, and see if the guards haven't gotten a little careless." He motioned to Myka and the Barbarian, and began to lead the way into the underbrush. He thrust out a hand to pull a sapling aside, and almost ran full-tilt into Harolde Dugald.

Dugald was almost exactly Geoffrey's age and size, but he had something Geoffrey lacked—a thin-lipped look of wolfish wisdom. His dark eyes were habitually slitted, and his mouth oddly off-center, always poised between a mirthless grin and a snarl. His long black hair curled under at the base of his skull, and his hands were covered with heavy gold and silver rings. There was one for each finger and thumb, and all of them were set with knobby precious stones.

His lips parted now, and his long white teeth showed plainly in the semidarkness. "I was coming back to inspect my prizes," he said in a voice like a fine-bladed saw chuckling through soft metal. "And look what I've found." The open mouth of his heavy, handmade side pistol pointed steadily between Geoffrey's eyes. "I find my erstwhile neighbor risen from the dead, and in the company of a crippled enemy and his leman. Indeed, my day is complete."

The one thing Geoffrey was not feeling was fear. The wire-thin strand of his accumulated rage was stretched to breaking. Somewhere, far from the forefront of his mind, he was feeling surprise and disappointment. He was perfectly aware of Dugald's weapon, and of what it would do to his head at this range. But Geoffrey was not stopping to think. And Dugald was a bit closer to him than he ought to have been.

Geoffrey's hands seemed to leap out. One tore the pistol out of Dugald's hand and knocked it spinning. The other cracked, open-palmed, against the other man's face, hard enough to split flesh and start the blood trickling down Dugald's cheek. The force of the combined blows sent Dugald staggering. He fell back, crashing into a bush, and hung against it. Stark fear shone in his eyes. He screamed: "Dugald! *Dugald!* To me! To me!"

For a second, everything went silent; nobles quarreling, guards roistering among the captures—suddenly the battlefield was still. Then the reaction to the rallying cry set off an entirely different kind of hubbub. The sound now was that of an alerted pack of dogs.

Once more, Geoffrey swept his hand across Dugald's face, feeling his own skin break over the knuckles. But there was no time for anything else. Now they had to run, and not in silence. Now everything went by the board, and the nearest safety was the best. Behind them as they tore through the brush, they could hear Dugald shouting:

"That way! The Barbarian's with him!" The Barbarian was grunting with every step. Myka was panting. Geoffrey was in the lead, his throat burning with every breath, not knowing where he was leading them, but trying to skirt around the pack of nobles that would be running toward them in the darkness.

He crashed against plated metal. He peered at it in the absolute darkness this far from the fires and torches. "Tankette!" he said hoarsely. "Empty." They scrambled onto

it, Geoffrey pulling at the Barbarian's arm. "Down, Myka—inside. Ought to be room between steering posts and motor." He pushed the woman down through the hatch, and dropped back to the ground. He ran to the crank clipped to one track housing and thrust it into place. "You—you'll have to hang onto—turret," he panted to the Barbarian. "Help me start." He wound furiously at the starting crank until he felt the flywheel spin free of the ratchet, and then engaged the driveshaft. The tankette shuddered to the sudden torque. The motor resisted, turned its shaft reluctantly, spun the magneto, ignited, stuttered, coughed, and began to roar. The headlights flickered yellowly, glowed up to brightness as the engine built up revolutions. The Barbarian, clinging to the turret with one arm, pushed the choke control back to halfway and advanced the spark. Geoffrey scrambled up the sharply pitched rear deck, clawing for handholds on the radiator tubing, and dropped into the turret seat. He took the controls, kicked at the left side track control without caring, for the moment, whether Myka was in the way or not, spun the tankette halfway round, and pulled the throttle out as far as it would go. Its engine clamoring, its rigid tracks transmitting every shock and battering them, the tankette flogged forward through the brush. There was gunfire booming behind them, and there were other motors sputtering into life.

There was no one among the nobles to drive as well as Geoffrey could—certainly no one who could keep up with him at night, in country he knew. He could probably depend on that much.

He lit the carbide lamp over the panel.

Geoffrey looked at the crest worked into the metal, and laughed. He had even managed to steal Dugald's tankette.

By morning, they were a good fifty miles away from where the battle had been fought. They were almost as far as the Delaware River, and the ground was broken into low hills, each a little higher than the last. Geoffrey had only been this far away from his home a few times, before his father's death, and then never in this direction. Civilization was not considered to extend this far inland. When a young man went on his travels, preparatory for the day when he inherited his father's holdings and settled down to maintain them, he went along the coast, perhaps as far as Philadelphia or Hartford.

Geoffrey had always had a lively interest in strange surroundings. He had regretted the day his journeyings came to an end—not that he hadn't regretted his father's passing even more. Now, as dawn came up behind them, he could not help turning his head from side to side and looking at the strangely humped land, seeing for the first time a horizon which was not flat. He found himself intrigued by the thought that he had no way of knowing what lay beyond the next hill—that he would have to travel, and keep traveling, to satisfy a perpetually renewed curiosity.

All this occupied one part of his mind. Simultaneously, he wondered how much farther they'd travel in this vehicle. The huge sixteen-cylinder in-line engine was by now delivering about one-fourth of its rated fifty horsepower, with a good half of its spark plugs hopelessly fouled and the carburetor choked by the dust of yesterday's battle.

They were very low on shot and powder charges for the two-pounder turret cannon, as well. The tankette had of course never been serviced after the battle. There was one good thing—neither had their pursuers'. Looking back, Geoffrey could see no sign of them. But he could also see the plain imprint of the tankette's steel cleats stretched out behind them in a betraying line. The rigid, unsprung track left its mark on hard stone as easily as it did in soft earth. The wonder was that the tracks had not quite worn

themselves out as yet, though all the rivets were badly strained and the tankette sounded like a barrel of stones tumbling downhill.

The Barbarian had spent the night with one arm thrown over the cannon barrel and the fingers of his other hand hooked over the edge of the turret hatch. In spite of the tankette's vicious jouncing, he had not moved or changed his position. Now he raised one hand to comb the shaggy hair away from his forehead, and there were faint bloody marks on the hatch.

"How much farther until we're over the mountains?" Geoffrey asked him.

"Over the—lad, we haven't even come to the beginning of them yet."

Geoffrey grimaced. "Then we'll never make it. Not in this vehicle."

"I didn't expect to. We'll walk until we reach the pass. I've got a support camp set up there."

"Walk? This is impossible country for people on foot. There are intransigent tribesmen all through this territory."

"How do you know?"

"How do I *know*? Why, everybody knows about them!"

The Barbarian looked at him thoughtfully, and with just the faintest trace of amusement. "Well, if *everybody* knows they're intransigent, I guess they are. I guess we'll just have to hope they don't spot us."

Geoffrey was a little nettled by the Barbarian's manner. It wasn't, after all, as if anybody claimed there were dragons or monsters or any other such oceanic thing living here. This was good, solid fact—people had actually come up here, tried to bring civilization to the tribes, and failed completely. They were, by all reports, hairy, dirty people equipped with accurate rifles. No one had bothered to press the issue, because obviously it was hardly worth it. Geoffrey had expected to have trouble with them—but he had expected to meet it in an armored vehicle. But now that the

mountains had turned out to be so far away, the situation might grow quite serious. And the Barbarian didn't seem to care very much.

"Well, now, lad," he was saying, "if the tribesmen're that bad, maybe your friends the nobles won't dare follow us up here."

"They'll follow us," Geoffrey answered flatly. "I slapped Dugald's face."

"Oh. Oh, I didn't understand that. Code of honor—that sort of thing. All the civilized appurtenances."

"It's hardly funny."

"No, I suppose not. I don't suppose it occurred to you to kill him on the spot?"

"Kill a *noble* in hot blood?"

"Sorry. Code of honor again. Forget I mentioned it."

Geoffrey rankled under the Barbarian's barely concealed amusement. To avoid any more of this kind of thing, he pointedly turned and looked at the terrain behind them—something he ought to have done a little earlier. Three tankettes were in sight, only a few miles behind them, laboring down the slope of a hill.

And at that moment, as though rivetted iron had a dramatic sense of its own, their tankette coughed, spun lazily on one track as the crankshaft paused with a cam squarely between positions, and burned up the last drops of oil and alcohol in its fuel tank.

Geoffrey and Myka crouched down in a brushy hollow. The Barbarian had crawled up to the lip of the depression, and was peering through a clump of weeds at the oncoming trio. "That seems to be all of them," he said with a turn of his head. "It's possible they kept their speed down and nursed themselves along to save fuel. They might even have a fuel wagon coming up behind them. That's the way I'd do it. It

would mean these three are all we can expect for a few hours, anyway, but that they'll be heavily reinforced some time later."

"That will hardly matter," Geoffrey muttered. Myka had found Dugald's personal rifle inside the tankette. Geoffrey was rolling cartridges quickly and expertly, using torn up charges from the turret cannon. He had made the choice between a round or two for the now immobile heavy weapon and a plentiful supply for the rifle, and would have been greatly surprised at anyone's choosing differently. The Barbarian had not even questioned it, and Myka was skillfully casting bullets with the help of the hissing alcohol stove and the bullet mold included in the rifle kit. There was plenty of finely ground priming powder, and even though Geoffrey was neither weighing the charges of cannon powder nor measuring the diameter of the cartridges he was rolling, no young noble of any pretensions whatsoever could not have done the same.

The rub lay in the fact that none of this was liable to do them much good. If they were to flee through the woods, there would certainly be time for only a shot or two when the tribesmen found them. If the rifle was to be used against the three nobles, then it was necessary, in all decency, to wait until the nobles had stopped, climbed out of their tankettes, equipped themselves equally, and a mutual ground of battle had been agreed upon. In that case, three against one would make short work of it.

The better chance lay with the woods and the tribesmen. It was the better chance, but Geoffrey did not relish it. He scowled as he dropped a primer charge down the rifle's barrel, followed it with a cartridge, took a cooled bullet from Myka, and tamped it down with the ramrod until it was firmly gripped by the collar on the cartridge. He took a square of clean flannel from its compartment in the butt and carefully wiped the lenses of the telescopic sight.

"Can I stop now?" Myka asked.

Geoffrey looked at her sharply. It had never occurred to him that the woman might simply be humoring him, and yet that was the tone her voice had taken. Truth to tell, he had simply handed her the stove, pig lead, and mold, and told her to go to work.

He looked at her now, remembering that he'd been hurried and possibly brusque. It ought not to matter—though it did—since she was hardly a lady entitled to courtesy. She hardly looked like anything, after hours crouched inside the tankette.

Her copper hair was smeared with grease, disarranged, and even singed where she had presumably leaned against a hot fitting. Her clothes were indescribably dirty and limp with perspiration. She was quite pale, and seemed to be fighting nausea—hardly surprising, with the exhaust fumes that must have been present in the compartment.

Nevertheless, her hair glinted where the sun struck it, and her liveness was only accented by the wrinkled clothing. Over-accented, Geoffrey thought to himself as he looked at the length of limb revealed by her short trousers.

He flushed. "Of course. Thank you." He looked at the pile of finished bullets. There were enough of them to stand off an army, provided only the army did not shift about behind rocks and trees as the tribesmen did, or was not equally armed, as the nobles would be. Yet, a man had to try to the end. "You don't expect this to do much good," he said to the woman.

Myka grinned at him. "Do you?"

"No, frankly. But why did you help me?"

"To keep you busy."

"I see." He didn't. He scooped the bullets up, put them in one pocket, and dropped the cartridges in another. He stood up.

"There wasn't any point in letting you get nervous," Myka explained. "You can be quite a deadly boy in action, if what I've seen and heard about you is any indication. I didn't

want you killing any of our friends.” She was smiling at him without any malice whatsoever; rather, with a definite degree of fondness. Geoffrey did not even feel resentful at this business of being casually managed, as though he were liable to do something foolish.

But he scrambled up to a place beside the Barbarian in a burst of tense movement, and looked out toward the approaching tankettes. What Myka had just said to him, and the cryptic smile on the Barbarian’s face, and a thought of Geoffrey’s own, had all fitted themselves together in his mind.

There was no reason, really, to believe that barbarians would be hostile to barbarians, and certainly the inland raiders could not have returned year after year without *some* means of handling the mountain tribes. Friendship, or at least an alliance, would be the easiest way.

And out on the slope of the nearest hill, bearded men in homespun clothing were rolling boulders down on the advancing tankettes.

The slope of the hill was quite steep, and the boulders were massive. They tumbled and bounded with a speed that must have seemed terrifying from below. Tearing great chunks out of the earth, they rumbled down on the tankettes while the tribesmen yelled with bloodcurdling ferocity and fired on the tankettes with impossible rapidity. With respectable marksmanship, too. The nobles were swerving their vehicles frantically from side to side, trying to avoid the boulders, but their ability to do so was being destroyed by bullets that ricocheted viciously off the canted forepeak plating. All three of them were blundering about like cattle attacked by stinging insects. Only the lead tankette was still under anything like intelligent control. It lurched away from three boulders in succession, swinging on its treads and continuing to churn its way up the hillside.

Geoffrey saw the other two tankettes struck almost simultaneously. One took a boulder squarely between its

tracks, and stopped in a shower of rock fragments. The track cleats bit futilely at the ground. The vehicle stalled, the boulder jammed against it. The impact did not seem to have been particularly severe; but the entire body of the tankette had been buckled and accordioned. Possibly only the boulder's own bulk between the tracks had kept them from coming together like the knees of a gored ox. It was impossible to tell where, in that crushed bulk, the turret and its occupant might be.

The other tankette took its boulder squarely in the flank. It began to roll over immediately, hurtling back down the hill, its driver half in and half out of its turret at the beginning of the first roll. Tankette and boulder came to rest together at the bottom of the hill, the stone nosing up against the metal.

Geoffrey looked at the scene with cold fury. "That's no fitting way for a noble to die!"

The Barbarian, who was sprawled out and watching calmly, nodded his head. "Probably not," he said dispassionately. "But that other man's giving a good account of himself."

The remaining tankette was almost in among the tribesmen. It had passed the point where a rolling boulder's momentum would be great enough to do much damage. As Geoffrey watched, the man in the turret yanked his lanyard, and a solid shot boomed through the straggled line of bearded men. If it had been grape or canister, it might have done a good deal of damage. But the cannon had been loaded with Geoffrey's tankette in mind, and the tribesmen only jeered. One of them dashed forward, under the cannon's smoking muzzle, and jammed a wedge-shaped stone between the left side track and the massive forward track roller. The track jammed, broke, and whipped back in whistling fragments. The tankette slewed around while the unharmed tribesman danced out of the way. The noble in the turret could only watch helplessly. Apparently he had no

sidearm. Geoffrey peered at him as the tribesmen swarmed over the tankette and dragged him out of the turret. It was Dugald, and Geoffrey's arm still tingled from the slap that had knocked the pistol irretrievably into the night-shadowed brush at the battlefield.

"What are they going to do to him?" he asked the Barbarian.

"Make him meet the test of fitness, I suppose."

"Fitness?"

Geoffrey did not get the answer to his question immediately. The woods all around him were stirring, and bearded men in homespun, carrying fantastic rifles, were casually walking toward him. The Barbarian pushed himself up to his feet without any show of surprise.

"Howdy," he said. "Figured you were right around."

One of the tribesmen—a gaunt, incredibly tall man with a grizzled beard—nodded. "I seen you makin' signs while you was hangin' off that tank, before. Got a mark?"

The Barbarian extended his right arm and turned his wrist over. A faint double scar, crossed at right angles, showed in the skin.

The tribesman peered at it and grunted. "Old one."

"I got it twenty years ago, when I first came through here," the Barbarian answered.

"Double, too. Ain't many of those."

"My name's Hodd Savage."

"Oh," the tribesman said. His entire manner changed. Without becoming servile, it was respectful. He extended his hand. "Sime Weatherby." He and the Barbarian clasped hands. "That your woman down there?" the tribesman asked, nodding toward Myka.

"That's right."

"Good enough." For the first time, Weatherby looked directly at Geoffrey. "What about him?"

The Barbarian shook his head. "No mark."

The tribesman nodded. "I figured, from the way he was actin'." He seemed to make no particular signal—perhaps none was needed—but Geoffrey's arms were suddenly taken from behind, and his wrists were tied.

"We'll see if he can get him a mark today," Weatherby said. He looked to his left, where other men were just pushing Dugald into the ring they had formed around the group. "Seein' as there's two of them, one of 'em ought to make it."

Geoffrey and Dugald stared expressionlessly at each other. The Barbarian kept his eyes on Geoffrey's face. "That's right," he said. "Can't have two men fight to the death without one of them coming out alive, usually."

The tribesmen lived in wooden cabins tucked away among trees and hidden in narrow little valleys. Geoffrey was surprised to see windmills, and wire fencing for the cattle pastures that adjoined their homes. He was even more interested in their rifles, which, the tribesmen told him, were repeaters. He was puzzled by the absence of a cylinder, such as could be found on the generally unreliable revolvers one saw occasionally.

The tribesmen were treating both him and Dugald with a complete absence of the savagery he expected. They were being perfectly matter-of-fact. If his hands had not been tied, Geoffrey might not have been a prisoner at all. This puzzled him as well. A prisoner, after all, could not expect to be treated very well. True, he and Dugald were nobles, but this could not possibly mean anything to persons as uncivilized as mountain tribesmen.

Yet somehow, the only thing that was done was that all of them; the tribesmen, the Barbarian, Myka, Dugald and he—made their way to Weatherby's home. A number of the tribesmen continued on their way from there, going to their

own homes to bring their families to watch the test. The remainder stayed behind to post guard. Dugald was put in one room, and Geoffrey in another. The Barbarian and Myka went off somewhere with Weatherby—presumably to have breakfast. Geoffrey could smell food cooking, somewhere toward the back of the house. The smell sat intolerably on his empty stomach.

He sat for perhaps a half hour in the room, which was almost bare of furniture. There was a straight-backed chair, in which he sat, a narrow bed, and a bureau. Even though his hands were still tied behind his back, he did his best to search the room for something to help him—though he had no idea of what he would do next after he managed to escape from the room itself.

The problem did not arise, because the room had been stripped of anything with a sharp edge on which to cut his lashings, and of anything else he might put to use. These people had obviously held prisoners here before. He sat back down in his chair, and stared at the wall.

Eventually, someone opened the door. Geoffrey looked over, and saw that it was the Barbarian. He looked at the inlander coldly, but the Barbarian did not seem to notice. He sat down on the edge of the bed.

“On top of everything else,” he began without preamble, “I’ve just finished a hearty breakfast. That ought to really make you mad at me.”

“I’m not concerned with you, or your meals,” Geoffrey pointed out.

The Barbarian’s eyes twinkled. “It doesn’t bother you, my getting your help and then not protecting you from these intransigent tribesmen?”

“Hardly. I’d be a fool to expect it.”

“Would you, now? Look, bucko—these people live a hard way of life. Living on a mountain is a good way not to live comfortably. But it’s a good way of living your own way, *if* you can stand the gaff. These people can. Every one of

them. They've got their marks to prove it. Every last one of them has fought it out face to face with another man, and proved his fitness to take up space in this territory. See—it's a social code. And they'll extend it to cover any stranger who doesn't get killed on his way here. If you can get your mark, you're welcome here for the rest of your life. They keep their clan stock fresh and vigorous that way. And it all has the virtue of being a uniform, just, rigid code that covers every man in the group. These barbarian cultures aren't ever happy without a good code to their name, you know."

"Yours seems to lack one."

The Barbarian chuckled. "Oh, no. We've got one, all right, or you'd never have had me to worry you. Nothing we like better than a good, talented enemy. You know, these people here in the mountains used to be our favorite enemies. But so many of us wound up getting our marks, it just got to be futile. Once you're in, you know, you're a full-fledged clan member. That sort of divided our loyalties. The problem just seemed to solve itself, though. We understand them, they understand us, we trade back and forth... hell, it's all one family."

Geoffrey frowned. "You mean—they got those rifles from you?"

"Sure. We're full of ingenuity—for barbarians, that is. Not in the same class with you seaboard nobles, of course, but we poke along." The Barbarian stood up, and his expression turned serious. "Look, son—you remember that knife of mine you borrowed for a while? I'll have to lend it to you again, in about twenty minutes. Your friend Dugald's going to have one just like it, and your left arms are going to be tied together at the wrists. I hope you remember what I happened to tell you about how to use it, because under the rules of the code, I'm not allowed to instruct you."

And Geoffrey was left alone.

There was a hard-packed area of dirt in front of Weatherby's home, and now its edges were crowded with tribesmen, many of whom had brought their women and children. Weatherby, together with a spare, capable-looking woman, and with the Barbarian and Myka, sat on his porch. One of the tribesmen was wrapping Geoffrey's and Dugald's forearms together. Geoffrey watched him with complete detachment. He stole a glance over toward Weatherby's porch, and it seemed to him that Myka was tense and anxious. He couldn't be sure...

The fingers of his right hand gripped the haft of the Barbarian's knife. He held it with his thumb along the blade, knowing that if he drew his arm up, to stab downward, or back, to slash, Dugald would have a perfect opening. It was his thought, remembering that razor-keen blade, that he ought to be able to do plenty of damage with a simple underhand twist of his arm. He did not look down to see how Dugald was holding the knife he'd been given. That would have been unfair.

The crowd of watching tribesmen was completely silent. This was a serious business with them, Geoffrey reflected.

The tribesman tying their wrists had finished the job. He stepped back. "Anytime after I say 'Go,' you boys set to it. Anything goes and dead man loses. If you don't fight, we kill you both."

For the first time since their capture, Geoffrey looked squarely into Dugald's slit eyes. "I'm sorry we have to do this to each other in this way, Dugald," he said.

"Go!" the tribesman shouted, and jumped back.

Dugald spat at Geoffrey's face. Geoffrey twitched his head involuntarily, realized what he'd done, and threw himself off his feet, pulling Dugald with him and just escaping the downward arc of Dugald's plunging knife. The momentum of Dugald's swing, combined with Geoffrey's weight, pulled him completely over Geoffrey's shoulder. The two of them jerked abruptly flat on the ground, their shoulders

wrenched, sprawled out facing each other and tied together like two cats on a string.

The crowd shouted.

Geoffrey had landed full on his ribs, and for a moment he saw nothing but a red mist. Then his eyes cleared and he was staring into Dugald's face. Dugald snarled at him, and pawed out with his knife, at the advantage now because he could stab downward. Geoffrey rolled, and Dugald perforce rolled with him. The stab missed again, and Geoffrey, on his back, jabbed blindly over his head and reached nothing. Then they were on their stomachs again.

Dugald was panting, his face running wet. The long black hair was full of dust, and his face was smeared. If ever Geoffrey had seen a man in an animal state, that was what Dugald resembled. Geoffrey thought wildly; Is this what a *noble* is?

"I'll kill you!" Dugald bayed at him, and Geoffrey's hackles rose. This is not a man, he thought. This is nothing that deserves to live.

Dugald's arm snapped back, knife poised, and drove downward again. Geoffrey suddenly coiled his back muscles and heaved on his left arm, yanking himself up against Dugald's chest. He snapped his hips sideward, and Dugald's knife missed him completely for the third and fatal time. The Barbarian's knife slipped upward into Dugald's rib cage, and suddenly Geoffrey was drenched with blood. Dugald's teeth bit into his neck, but the other man's jaws were already slackening. Geoffrey let himself slump, and hoped they would cut this carrion away from him as soon as possible. He heard the crowd yelping, and felt the Barbarian plucking the knife out of his hand. His arm was freed, and he rolled away.

"By God, I *knew* you had the stuff," the Barbarian was booming. "I knew they had to start breeding men out on the coast sooner or later. Here—give me your other wrist." The blade burned his skin twice each way—once for victory and

once for special aptitude—and then Myka pressed a cloth to the wound.

She was shaking her head. “I’ve never seen it done better. You’re a natural born fighter, lad. I’ve got one of my sisters all picked out for you.”

Geoffrey smiled up at the Barbarian, a little ruefully. “It seems you and I’ll be going back to the coast together, next year.”

“Had it in mind all along, lad,” the Barbarian said. “If I can’t lick ’em, I’ll be damned if I won’t make ’em join me.”

“It’s an effective system,” Geoffrey said.

“That it is, lad. That it is. And now, if you’ll climb up to your feet, let’s go get you some breakfast.”

THE STOKER AND THE STARS

Know him? Yes, I know him—*knew* him. That was twenty years ago.

Everybody knows him now. Everybody who passed him on the street knows him. Everybody who went to the same schools, or even to different schools in different towns, knows him now. Ask them. But I knew him. I lived three feet away from him for a month and a half. I shipped with him and called him by his first name.

What was he like? What was he thinking, sitting on the edge of his bunk with his jaw in his palm and his eyes on the stars? What did he think he was after?

Well... Well, I think he—You know, I think I never did know him, after all. Not well. Not as well as some of those people who're writing the books about him seem to.

I couldn't really describe him to you. He had a duffel bag in his hand and a packed airtuit on his back. The skin of his face had been dried out by ship's air, burned by ultraviolet and broiled by infra red. The pupils of his eyes had little cloudy specks in them where the cosmic rays had shot through them. But his eyes were steady and his body was hard. What did he look like? He looked like a man.

It was after the war, and we were beaten. There used to be a school of thought among us that deplored our combativeness; before we had ever met any people from off Earth, even, you could hear people saying we were toughest,

cruellest life-form in the Universe, unfit to mingle with the gentler wiser races in the stars, and a sure bet to steal their galaxy and corrupt it forever. Where these people got their information, I don't know.

We were beaten. We moved out beyond Centaurus, and Sirius, and then we met the Jeks, the Nosurwey, the Lud. We tried Terrestrial know-how, we tried Production Miracles, we tried patriotism, we tried damning the torpedoes and full speed ahead... and we were smashed back like mayflies in the wind. We died in droves, and we retreated from the guttering fires of a dozen planets, we dug in, we fought through the last ditch, and we were dying on Earth itself before Baker mutinied, shot Cope, and surrendered the remainder of the human race to the wiser, gentler races in the stars. That way, we lived. That way, we were permitted to carry on our little concerns, and mind our manners. The Jeks and the Lud and the Nosurwey returned to their own affairs, and we knew they would leave us alone so long as we didn't bother them.

We liked it that way. Understand me—we didn't accept it, we didn't knuckle under with waiting murder in our hearts—we *liked* it. We were grateful just to be left alone again. We were happy we hadn't been wiped out like the upstarts the rest of the Universe thought us to be. When they let us keep our own solar system and carry on a trickle of trade with the outside, we accepted it for the fantastically generous gift it was. Too many of our best men were dead for us to have any remaining claim on these things in our own right. I know how it was. I was there, twenty years ago. I was a little, pudgy man with short breath and a high-pitched voice. I was a typical Earthman.

We were out on a Godforsaken landing field on Mars, MacReidie and I, loading cargo aboard the *Serenus*.

MacReidie was First Officer. I was Second. The stranger came walking up to us.

“Got a job?” he asked, looking at MacReidie.

Mac looked him over. He saw the same things I’d seen. He shook his head. “Not for you. The only thing we’re short on is stokers.”

You wouldn’t know. There’s no such thing as a stoker any more, with automatic ships. But the stranger knew what Mac meant.

Serenus had what they called an electronic drive. She had to run with an evacuated engine room. The leaking electricity would have broken any stray air down to ozone, which eats metal and rots lungs. So the engine room had the air pumped out of her, and the stokers who tended the dials and set the cathode attitudes had to wear suits, smelling themselves for twelve hours at a time and standing a good chance of cooking where they sat when the drive arced.

Serenus was an ugly old tub. At that, we were the better of the two interstellar freighters the human race had left.

“You’re bound over the border, aren’t you?”

MacReidie nodded. “That’s right. But—”

“I’ll stoke.”

MacReidie looked over toward me and frowned. I shrugged my shoulders helplessly. I was a little afraid of the stranger, too.

The trouble was the look of him. It was the look you saw in the bars back on Earth, where the veterans of the war sat and stared down into their glasses, waiting for night to fall so they could go out into the alleys and have drunken fights among themselves. But he had brought that look to Mars, to the landing field, and out here there was something disquieting about it.

He’d caught Mac’s look and turned his head to me. “I’ll stoke,” he repeated.

I didn’t know what to say. MacReidie and I—almost all of the men in the Merchant Marine—hadn’t served in the

combat arms. We had freighted supplies, and we had seen ships dying on the runs—we'd had our own brushes with commerce raiders, and we'd known enough men who joined the combat forces. But very few of the men came back, and the war this man had fought hadn't been the same as ours. He'd commanded a fighting ship, somewhere, and come to grips with things we simply didn't know about. The mark was on him, but not on us. I couldn't meet his eyes. "OK by me," I mumbled at last.

I saw MacReidie's mouth turn down at the corners. But he couldn't gainsay the man any more than I could. MacReidie wasn't a mumbling man, so he said angrily: "OK, bucko, you'll stoke. Go and sign on."

"Thanks." The stranger walked quietly away. He wrapped a hand around the cable on a cargo hook and rode into the hold on top of some freight. Mac spat on the ground and went back to supervising his end of the loading. I was busy with mine, and it wasn't until we'd gotten the *Serenus* loaded and buttoned up that Mac and I even spoke to each other again. Then we talked about the trip. We didn't talk about the stranger.

Daniels, the Third, had signed him on and had moved him into the empty bunk above mine. We slept all in a bunch on the *Serenus*—officers and crew. Even so, we had to sleep in shifts, with the ship's designers giving ninety percent of her space to cargo, and eight percent to power and control. That left very little for the people, who were crammed in any way they could be. I said empty bunk. What I meant was, empty during my sleep shift. That meant he and I'd be sharing work shifts—me up in the control blister, parked in a soft chair, and him down in the engine room, broiling in a suit for twelve hours.

But I ate with him, used the head with him; you can call that rubbing elbows with greatness, if you want to.

He was a very quiet man. Quiet in the way he moved and talked. When we were both climbing into our bunks, that first night, I introduced myself and he introduced himself. Then he heaved himself into his bunk, rolled over on his side, fixed his straps, and fell asleep. He was always friendly toward me, but he must have been very tired that first night. I often wondered what kind of a life he'd lived after the war—what he'd done that made him different from the men who simply grew older in the bars. I wonder, now, if he really did do anything different. In an odd way, I like to think that one day, in a bar, on a day that seemed like all the rest to him when it began, he suddenly looked up with some new thought, put down his glass, and walked straight to the Earth-Mars shuttle field.

He might have come from any town on Earth. Don't believe the historians too much. Don't pay too much attention to the Chamber of Commerce plaques. When a man's name becomes public property, strange things happen to the facts.

It was MacReidie who first found out what he'd done during the war.

I've got to explain about MacReidie. He takes his opinions fast and strong. He's a good man—is, or was; I haven't seen him for a long while—but he liked things simple.

MacReidie said the duffel bag broke loose and floated into the middle of the bunkroom during acceleration. He opened it to see whose it was. When he found out, he closed it up and strapped it back in its place at the foot of the stoker's bunk.

MacReidie was my relief on the bridge. When he came up, he didn't relieve me right away. He stood next to my chair

and looked out through the ports.

“Captain leave any special instructions in the Order Book?” he asked.

“Just the usual. Keep a tight watch and proceed cautiously.”

“That new stoker,” Mac said.

“Yeah?”

“I knew there was something wrong with him. He’s got an old Marine uniform in his duffel.”

I didn’t say anything. Mac glanced over at me. “Well?”

“I don’t know.” I didn’t.

I couldn’t say I was surprised. It had to be something like that, about the stoker. The mark was on him, as I’ve said.

It was the Marines that did Earth’s best dying. It had to be. They were trained to be the best we had, and they believed in their training. They were the ones who slashed back the deepest when the other side hit us. They were the ones who sallied out into the doomed spaces between the stars and took the war to the other side as well as any human force could ever hope to. They were always the last to leave an abandoned position. If Earth had been giving medals to members of her forces in the war, every man in the Corps would have had the Medal of Honor two and three times over. Posthumously. I don’t believe there were ten of them left alive when Cope was shot. Cope was one of them. They were a kind of human being neither MacReidie nor I could hope to understand.

“You don’t know,” Mac said. “It’s there. In his duffel. Damn it, we’re going out to trade with his sworn enemies! Why do you suppose he wanted to sign on? Why do you suppose he’s so eager to go!”

“You think he’s going to try to start something?”

“Think! That’s exactly what he’s going for. One last big alley fight. One last brawl. When they cut him down—do you suppose they’ll stop with him? They’ll kill us, and then

they'll go in and stamp Earth flat! You know it as well as I do."

"I don't know, Mac," I said. "Go easy." I could feel the knots in my stomach. I didn't want any trouble. Not from the stoker, not from Mac. None of us wanted trouble—not even Mac, but he'd cause it to get rid of it, if you follow what I mean about his kind of man.

Mac hit the viewport with his fist. "Easy! Easy—nothing's easy. I hate this life," he said in a murderous voice. "I don't know why I keep signing on. Mars to Centaurus and back, back and forth, in an old rust tub that's going to blow herself up one of these—"

Daniels called me on the phone from Communications. "Turn up your Intercom volume," he said. "The stoker's jamming the circuit."

I kicked the selector switch over, and this is what I got:
"—so there we were at a million per, and the air was gettin' thick. The Skipper says 'Cheer up, brave boys, we'll—'"

He was singing. He had a terrible voice, but he could carry a tune, and he was hammering it out at the top of his lungs.

"'Twas the last cruise of the Venus, by God you should of seen us! The pipes were full of whisky, and just to make things risky, the jets were..."

The crew were chuckling into their own chest phones. I could hear Daniels trying to cut him off. But he kept going. I started laughing myself. No one's supposed to jam an intercom, but it made the crew feel good. When the crew feels good, the ship runs right, and it had been a long time since they'd been happy.

He went on for another twenty minutes. Then his voice thinned out, and I heard him cough a little. "Daniels," he said, "get a relief down here for me. *Jump to it!*" He said the

last part in a Master's voice. Daniels didn't ask questions. He sent a man on his way down.

He'd been singing, the stoker had. He'd been singing while he worked with one arm dead, one sleeve ripped open and badly patched because the fabric was slippery with blood. There'd been a flashover in the drivers. By the time his relief got down there, he had the insulation back on, and the drive was purring along the way it should have been. It hadn't even missed a beat.

He went down to sick bay, got the arm wrapped, and would have gone back on shift if Daniels'd let him.

Those of us who were going off shift found him toying with the theremin in the mess compartment. He didn't know how to play it, and it sounded like a dog howling.

"Sing, will you!" somebody yelled. He grinned and went back to the "Good Ship *Venus*." It wasn't good, but it was loud. From that, we went to "Starways, Farways, and Barways," and "The Freefall Song." Somebody started "I Left Her Behind For You," and that got us off into sentimental things, the way these sessions would sometimes wind up when spacemen were far from home. But not since the war, we all seemed to realize together. We stopped, and looked at each other, and we all began drifting out of the mess compartment.

And maybe it got to him, too. It may explain something. He and I were the last to leave. We went to the bunkroom, and he stopped in the middle of taking off his shirt. He stood there, looking out the porthole, and forgot I was there. I heard him reciting something, softly, under his breath, and I stepped a little closer. This is what it was:

"The rockets rise against the skies,
Slowly; in sunlight gleaming
With silver hue upon the blue.
And the universe waits, dreaming.

“For men must go where the flame-winds blow,
The gas clouds softly plaiting;
Where stars are spun and worlds begun,
And men will find them waiting.

“The song that roars where the rocket soars
Is the song of the stellar flame;
The dreams of Man and galactic span
Are equal and much the same.”

What was he thinking of? Make your own choice. I think I came close to knowing him, at that moment, but until human beings turn telepath, no man can be sure of another.

He shook himself like a dog out of cold water, and got into his bunk. I got into mine, and after a while I fell asleep.

I don't know what MacReidie may have told the skipper about the stoker, or if he tried to tell him anything. The captain was the senior ticket holder in the Merchant Service, and a good man, in his day. He kept mostly to his cabin. And there was nothing MacReidie could do on his own authority—nothing simple, that is. And the stoker had saved the ship, and ...

I think what kept anything from happening between MacReidie and the stoker, or anyone else and the stoker, was that it would have meant trouble in the ship. Trouble, confined to our little percentage of the ship's volume, could seem like something much more important than the fate of the human race. It may not seem that way to you. But as long as no one began anything, we could all get along. We could have a good trip.

MacReidie worried, I'm sure. I worried, sometimes. But nothing happened.

When we reached Alpha Centaurus, and set down at the trading field on the second planet, it was the same as the other trips we'd made, and the same kind of landfall. The Lud factor came out of his post after we'd waited for a while, and gave us our permit to disembark. There was a Jek ship at the other end of the field, loaded with the cargo we would get in exchange for our holdful of goods. We had the usual things; wine, music tapes, furs, and the like. The Jeks had been giving us light machinery lately—probably we'd get two or three more loads, and then they'd begin giving us something else.

But I found that this trip wasn't quite the same. I found myself looking at the factor's post, and I realized for the first time that the Lud hadn't built it. It was a leftover from the old colonial human government. And the city on the horizon—men had built it; the touch of our architecture was on every building. I wondered why it had never occurred to me that this was so. It made the landfall different from all the others, somehow. It gave a new face to the entire planet.

Mac and I and some of the other crewmen went down on the field to handle the unloading. Jeks on self-propelled cargo lifts jockeyed among us, scooping up the loads as we unhooked the slings, bringing cases of machinery from their own ship. They sat atop their vehicles, lean and aloof, dashing in, whirling, shooting across the field to their ship and back like wild horsemen on the plains of Earth, paying us no notice.

We were almost through when Mac suddenly grabbed my arm. "Look!"

The stoker was coming down on one of the cargo slings. He stood upright, his booted feet planted wide, one arm curled up over his head and around the hoist cable. He was in his dusty brown Marine uniform, the scarlet collar tabs

bright as blood at his throat, his major's insignia glittering at his shoulders, the battle stripes on his sleeves.

The Jeks stopped their lifts. They knew that uniform. They sat up in their saddles and watched him come down. When the sling touched the ground, he jumped off quietly and walked toward the nearest Jek. They all followed him with their eyes.

"We've got to stop him," Mac said, and both of us started toward him. His hands were both in plain sight, one holding his duffel bag, which was swelled out with the bulk of his airsuit. He wasn't carrying a weapon of any kind. He was walking casually, taking his time.

Mac and I had almost reached him when a Jek with insignia on his coveralls suddenly jumped down from his lift and came forward to meet him. It was an odd thing to see—the stoker, and the Jek, who did not stand as tall. MacReidie and I stepped back.

The Jek was coal black, his scales glittering in the cold sunlight, his hatchet-face inscrutable. He stopped when the stoker was a few paces away. The stoker stopped, too. All the Jeks were watching him and paying no attention to anything else. The field might as well have been empty except for those two.

"They'll kill him. They'll kill him right now," MacReidie whispered.

They ought to have. If I'd been a Jek, I would have thought that uniform was a death warrant. But the Jek spoke to him:

"Are you entitled to wear that?"

"I was at this planet in '39. I was closer to your home world the year before that," the stoker said. "I was captain of a destroyer. If I'd had a cruiser's range, I would have reached it." He looked at the Jek. "Where were you?"

"I was here when you were."

"I want to speak to your ship's captain."

"All right. I'll drive you over."

The stoker nodded, and they walked over to his vehicle together. They drove away, toward the Jek ship.

“All right, let’s get back to work,” another Jek said to MacReidie and myself, and we went back to unloading cargo.

The stoker came back to our ship that night, without his duffel bag. He found me and said:

“I’m signing off the ship. Going with the Jeks.”

MacReidie was with me. He said loudly: “What do you mean, you’re going with the Jeks?”

“I signed on their ship,” the stoker said. “Stoking. They’ve got a micro-nuclear drive. It’s been a while since I worked with one, but I think I’ll make out all right, even with the screwball way they’ve got it set up.”

“Huh?”

The stoker shrugged. “Ships are ships, and physics is physics, no matter where you go. I’ll make out.”

“What kind of a deal did you make with them? What do you think you’re up to?”

The stoker shook his head. “No deal. I signed on as a crewman. I’ll do a crewman’s work for a crewman’s wages. I thought I’d wander around a while. It ought to be interesting,” he said.

“On a Jek ship.”

“Anybody’s ship. When I get to their home world, I’ll probably ship out with some people from farther on. Why not? It’s honest work.”

MacReidie had no answer to that.

“But—” I said.

“What?” He looked at me as if he couldn’t understand what might be bothering me, but I think perhaps he could.

“Nothing,” I said, and that was that, except MacReidie was always a sourer man from that time up to as long as I knew

him afterwards. We took off in the morning. The stoker had already left on the Jek ship, and it turned out he'd trained an apprentice boy to take his place.

It was strange how things became different for us, little by little after that. It was never anything you could put your finger on, but the Jeks began taking more goods, and giving us things we needed when we told them we wanted them. After a while, *Serenus* was going a little deeper into Jek territory, and when she wore out, the two replacements let us trade with the Lud, too. Then it was the Nosurwey, and other people beyond them, and things just got better for us, somehow.

We heard about our stoker, occasionally. He shipped with the Lud, and the Nosurwey, and some people beyond them, getting along, going to all kinds of places. Pay no attention to the precise red lines you see on the star maps; nobody knows exactly what path he wandered from people to people. Nobody could. He just kept signing on with whatever ship was going deeper into the galaxy, going farther and farther. He messed with green shipmates and blue ones. One and two and three heads, tails, six legs—after all, ships are ships and they've all got to have something to push them along. If a man knows his business, why not? A man can live on all kinds of food, if he wants to get used to it. And any nontoxic atmosphere will do, as long as there's enough oxygen in it.

I don't know what he did, to make things so much better for us. I don't know if he did anything, but stoke their ships and, I suppose, fix them when they were in trouble. I wonder if he sang dirty songs in that bad voice of his, to people who couldn't possibly understand what the songs were about. All I know is, for some reason those people slowly began treating us with respect. We changed, too, I think—I'm not

the same man I was... I think—not altogether the same; I'm a captain now, with master's papers, and you won't find me in my cabin very often... there's a kind of joy in standing on a bridge, looking out at the stars you're moving toward. I wonder if it mightn't have kept my old captain out of that place he died in, finally, if he'd tried it.

So, I don't know. The older I get, the less I know. The thing people remember the stoker for—the thing that makes him famous, and, I think, annoys him—I'm fairly sure is only incidental to what he really did. If he did anything. If he meant to. I wish I could be sure of the exact answer he found in the bottom of that last glass at the bar before he worked his passage to Mars and the *Serenus*, and began it all.

So, I can't say what he ought to be famous for. But I suppose it's enough to know for sure that he was the first living being ever to travel all the way around the galaxy.

WALL OF CRYSTAL, EYE OF NIGHT

I

Soft as the voice of a mourning dove, the telephone sounded at Rufus Sollenaar's desk. Sollenaar himself was standing fifty paces away, his leonine head cocked, his hands flat in his hip pockets, watching the nighted world through the crystal wall that faced out over Manhattan Island. The window was so high that some of what he saw was dimmed by low clouds hovering over the rivers. Above him were stars; below him the city was traced out in light and brimming with light. A falling star—an interplanetary rocket—streaked down toward Long Island Facility like a scratch across the soot on the doors of Hell.

Sollenaar's eyes took it in, but he was watching the total scene, not any particular part of it. His eyes were shining.

When he heard the telephone, he raised his left hand to his lips. "Yes?" The hand glittered with utilijem rings; the effect was that of an attempt at the sort of copper-binding that was once used to reinforce the ribbing of wooden warships.

His personal receptionist's voice moved from the air near his desk to the air near his ear. Seated at the monitor board in her office, wherever in this building her office was, the receptionist told him:

"Mr. Ermine says he has an appointment."

“No.” Sollenar dropped his hand and returned to his panorama. When he had been twenty years younger—managing the modest optical factory that had provided the support of three generations of Sollenars—he had very much wanted to be able to stand in a place like this, and feel as he imagined men felt in such circumstances. But he felt unimaginable, now.

To be here was one thing. To have almost lost the right, and regained it at the last moment, was another. Now he knew that not only could he be here today but that tomorrow, and tomorrow, he could still be here. He had won. His gamble had given him EmpaVid—and EmpaVid would give him all.

The city was not merely a prize set down before his eyes. It was a dynamic system he had proved he could manipulate. He and the city were one. It buoyed and sustained him; it supported him, here in the air, with stars above and light-thickened mist below.

The telephone mourned: “Mr. Ermine states he has a firm appointment.”

“I’ve never heard of him.” And the left hand’s utilijems fell from Sollenar’s lips again. He enjoyed such toys. He raised his right hand, sheathed in insubstantial midnight-blue silk in which the silver threads of metallic wiring ran subtly toward the fingertips. He raised the hand, and touched two fingers together: music began to play behind and before him. He made contact between another combination of finger circuits, and a soft, feminine laugh came from the terrace at the other side of the room, where connecting doors had opened. He moved toward it. One layer of translucent drapery remained across the doorway, billowing lightly in the breeze from the terrace. Through it, he saw the taboret with its candle lit; the iced wine in the stand beside it; the two fragile chairs; Bess Allardyce, slender and regal, waiting in one of them—all these, through the misty curtain, like either the beginning or the end of a dream.

“Mr. Ermine reminds you the appointment was made for him at the Annual Business Dinner of the International Association of Broadcasters, in 1998.”

Sollenar completed his latest step, then stopped. He frowned down at his left hand. “Is Mr. Ermine with the I.A.B.’s Special Public Relations Office?”

“Yes,” the voice said after a pause.

The fingers of Sollenar’s right hand shrank into a cone. The connecting door closed. The girl disappeared. The music stopped. “All right. You can tell Mr. Ermine to come up.” Sollenar went to sit behind his desk.

The office door chimed. Sollenar crooked a finger of his left hand, and the door opened. With another gesture, he kindled the overhead lights near the door and sat in shadow as Mr. Ermine came in.

Ermine was dressed in rust-colored garments. His figure was spare, and his hands were empty. His face was round and soft, with long dark sideburns. His scalp was bald. He stood just inside Sollenar’s office and said: “I would like some light to see you by, Mr. Sollenar.”

Sollenar crooked his little finger.

The overhead lights came to soft light all over the office. The crystal wall became a mirror, with only the strongest city lights glimmering through it. “I only wanted to see you first,” said Sollenar; “I thought perhaps we’d met before.”

“No,” Ermine said, walking across the office. “It’s not likely you’ve ever seen me.” He took a card case out of his pocket and showed Sollenar proper identification. “I’m not a very forward person.”

“Please sit down,” Sollenar said. “What may I do for you?”

“At the moment, Mr. Sollenar, I’m doing something for you.”

Sollenar sat back in his chair. "Are you? Are you, now?" He frowned at Ermine. "When I became a party to the By-Laws passed at the '98 Dinner, I thought a Special Public Relations Office would make a valuable asset to the organization. Consequently, I voted for it, and for the powers it was given. But I never expected to have any personal dealings with it. I barely remembered you people had carte blanche with any I.A.B. member."

"Well, of course, it's been a while since '98," Ermine said. "I imagine some legends have grown up around us. Industry gossip—that sort of thing."

"Yes."

"But we don't restrict ourselves to an enforcement function, Mr. Sollenar. You haven't broken any By-Laws, to our knowledge."

"Or mine. But nobody feels one hundred percent secure. Not under these circumstances." Nor did Sollenar yet relax his face into its magnificent smile. "I'm sure you've found that out."

"I have a somewhat less ambitious older brother who's with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. When I embarked on my own career, he told me I could expect everyone in the world to react like a criminal, yes," Ermine said, paying no attention to Sollenar's involuntary blink. "It's one of the complicating factors in a profession like my brother's, or mine. But I'm here to advise you, Mr. Sollenar. Only that."

"In what matter, Mr. Ermine?"

"Well, your corporation recently came into control of the patents for a new video system. I understand that this in effect makes your corporation the licensor for an extremely valuable sales and entertainment medium. Fantastically valuable."

“EmpaVid,” Sollenar agreed. “Various subliminal stimuli are broadcast with and keyed to the overt subject matter. The home receiving unit contains feedback sensors which determine the viewer’s reaction to these stimuli, and intensify some while playing down others in order to create complete emotional rapport between the viewer and the subject matter. EmpaVid, in other words, is a system for orchestrating the viewer’s emotions. The home unit is self-contained, semi-portable and not significantly bulkier than the standard TV receiver. EmpaVid is compatible with standard TV receivers—except, of course, that the subject matter seems thin and vaguely unsatisfactory on a standard receiver. So the consumer shortly purchases an E.V. unit.” It pleased Sollenar to spell out the nature of his prize.

“At a very reasonable price. Quite so, Mr. Sollenar. But you had several difficulties in finding potential licensees for this system, among the networks.”

Sollenar’s lips pinched out.

Mr. Ermine raised one finger. “First, there was the matter of acquiring the patents from the original inventor, who was also approached by Cortwright Burr.”

“Yes, he was,” Sollenar said in a completely new voice.

“Competition between Mr. Burr and yourself is long-standing and intense.”

“Quite intense,” Sollenar said, looking directly ahead of him at the one blank wall of the office. Burr’s offices were several blocks downtown, in that direction.

“Well, I have no wish to enlarge on that point, Mr. Burr being an I.A.B. member in standing as good as yours, Mr. Sollenar. There was, in any case, a further difficulty in licensing E.V., due to the very heavy cost involved in equipping broadcasting stations and network relay equipment for this sort of transmission.”

“Yes, there was.”

“Ultimately, however, you succeeded. You pointed out, quite rightly, that if just one station made the change, and if

just a few E.V. receivers were put into public places within the area served by that station, normal TV outlets could not possibly compete for advertising revenue.”

“Yes.”

“And so your last difficulties were resolved a few days ago, when your EmpaVid Unlimited—pardon me; when EmpaVid, a subsidiary of the Sollenar Corporation—became a major stockholder in the Transworld TV Network.”

“I don’t understand, Mr. Ermine,” Sollenar said. “Why are you recounting this? Are you trying to demonstrate the power of your knowledge? All these transactions are already matters of record in the I.A.B. confidential files, in accordance with the By-Laws.”

Ermine held up another finger. “You’re forgetting I’m only here to advise you. I have two things to say. They are:

“These transactions are on file with the I.A.B. because they involve a great number of I.A.B. members, and an increasingly large amount of capital. Also, Transworld’s exclusivity, under the I.A.B. By-Laws, will hold good only until thirty-three percent market saturation has been reached. If E.V. is as good as it looks, that will be quite soon. After that, under the By-Laws, Transworld will be restrained from making effective defenses against patent infringement by competitors. Then all of the I.A.B.’s membership and much of their capital will be involved with E.V. Much of that capital is already in anticipatory motion. So a highly complex structure now ultimately depends on the integrity of the Sollenar Corporation. If Sollenar stock falls in value, not just you but many I.A.B. members will be greatly embarrassed. Which is another way of saying E.V. must succeed.”

“I know all that! What of it? There’s no risk. I’ve had every related patent on Earth checked. There will be no

catastrophic obsolescence of the E.V. system.”

Ermine said: “There are engineers on Mars. Martian engineers. They’re a dying race, but no one knows what they can still do.”

Sollenar raised his massive head.

Ermine said: “Late this evening, my office learned that Cortwright Burr has been in close consultation with the Martians for several weeks. They have made some sort of machine for him. He was on the flight that landed at the Facility a few moments ago.”

Sollenar’s fists clenched. The lights crashed off and on, and the room wailed. From the terrace came a startled cry, and a sound of smashed glass.

Mr. Ermine nodded, excused himself and left.

—A few moments later, Mr. Ermine stepped out at the pedestrian level of the Sollenar Building. He strolled through the landscaped garden, and across the frothing brook toward the central walkway down the Avenue. He paused at a hedge to pluck a blossom and inhale its odor. He walked away, holding it in his naked fingers.

II

Drifting slowly on the thread of his spinneret, Rufus Sollenar came gliding down the wind above Cortwright Burr’s building.

The building, like a spider, touched the ground at only the points of its legs. It held its wide, low bulk spread like a parasol over several downtown blocks. Sollenar, manipulating the helium-filled plastic drifter far above him, steered himself with jets of compressed gas from plastic bottles in the drifter’s structure.

Only Sollenar himself, in all this system, was not effectively transparent to the municipal anti-plane radar. And he himself was wrapped in long, fluttering streamers of dull black, metallic sheeting. To the eye, he was amorphous and non-reflective. To electronic sensors, he was a drift of static much like a sheet of foil picked by the wind from some careless trash heap. To all of the senses of all interested parties he was hardly there at all—and, thus, in an excellent position for murder.

He fluttered against Burr's window. There was the man, crouched over his desk. What was that in his hands—a pomander?

Sollenar clipped his harness to the edges of the cornice. Swayed out against it, his sponge-soled boots pressed to the glass, he touched his left hand to the window and described a circle. He pushed; there was a thud on the carpeting in Burr's office, and now there was no barrier to Sollenar. Doubling his knees against his chest, he catapulted forward, the riot pistol in his right hand. He stumbled and fell to his knees, but the gun was up.

Burr jolted up behind his desk. The little sphere of orange-gold metal, streaked with darker bronze, its surface vermicular with encrustations, was still in his hands. "Him!" Burr cried out as Sollenar fired.

Gasping, Sollenar watched the charge strike Burr. It threw his torso backward faster than his limbs and head could follow without dangling. The choked-down pistol was nearly silent. Burr crashed backward to end, transfixed, against the wall.

Pale and sick, Sollenar moved to take the golden ball. He wondered where Shakespeare could have seen an example such as this, to know an old man could have so much blood in him.

Burr held the prize out to him. Staring with eyes distended by hydrostatic pressure, his clothing raddled and his torso grinding its broken bones, Burr stalked away from the wall and moved as if to embrace Sollenar. It was queer, but he was not dead.

Shuddering, Sollenar fired again.

Again Burr was thrown back. The ball spun from his splayed fingers as he once more marked the wall with his body.

Pomander, orange, whatever—it looked valuable.

Sollenar ran after the rolling ball. And Burr moved to intercept him, nearly faceless, hunched under a great invisible weight that slowly yielded as his back groaned.

Sollenar took a single backward step.

Burr took a step toward him. The golden ball lay in a far corner. Sollenar raised the pistol despairingly and fired again. Burr tripped backward on tiptoe, his arms like windmills, and fell atop the prize.

Tears ran down Sollenar's cheeks. He pushed one foot forward... and Burr, in his corner, lifted his head and began to gather his body for the effort of rising.

Sollenar retreated to the window, the pistol sledging backward against his wrist and elbow as he fired the remaining shots in the magazine.

Panting, he climbed up into the window frame and clipped the harness to his body, craning to look over his shoulder... as Burr—shredded; leaking blood and worse than blood—advanced across the office.

He cast off his holds on the window frame and clumsily worked the drifter controls. Far above him, volatile ballast spilled out and dispersed in the air long before it touched ground. Sollenar rose, sobbing—

And Burr stood in the window, his shattered hands on the edges of the cut circle, raising his distended eyes steadily to watch Sollenar in flight across the enigmatic sky.

Where he landed, on the roof of a building in his possession, Sollenar had a disposal unit for his gun and his other trappings. He deferred for a time the question of why Burr had failed at once to die. Empty-handed, he returned uptown.

He entered his office, called and told his attorneys the exact times of departure and return and knew the question of dealing with municipal authorities was thereby resolved. That was simple enough, with no witnesses to complicate the matter. He began to wish he hadn't been so irresolute as to leave Burr without the thing he was after. Surely, if the pistol hadn't killed the man—an old man, with thin limbs and spotted skin—he could have wrestled that thin-limbed, bloody old man aside—that spotted old man—and dragged himself and his prize back to the window, for all that the old man would have clung to him, and clutched at his legs, and fumbled for a handhold on his somber disguise of wrappings—that broken, immortal old man.

Sollenar raised his hand. The great window to the city grew opaque.

Bess Allardyce knocked softly on the door from the terrace. He would have thought she'd returned to her own apartments many hours ago. Tortuously pleased, he opened the door and smiled at her, feeling the dried tears crack on the skin of his cheeks.

He took her proffered hands. "You waited for me," he sighed. "A long time for anyone as beautiful as you to wait."

She smiled back at him. "Let's go out and look at the stars."

"Isn't it chilly?"

"I made spiced hot cider for us. We can sip it and think."

He let her draw him out onto the terrace. He leaned on the parapet, his arm around her pulsing waist, his cape drawn around both their shoulders.

“Bess, I won’t ask if you’d stay with me no matter what the circumstances. But it might be a time will come when I couldn’t bear to live in this city. What about that?”

“I don’t know,” she answered honestly.

And Cortwright Burr put his hand up over the edge of the parapet, between them.

Sollenar stared down at the straining knuckles, holding the entire weight of the man dangling against the sheer face of the building. There was a sliding, rustling noise, and the other hand came up, searched blindly for a hold and found it, hooked over the stone. The fingers tensed and rose, their tips flattening at the pressure as Burr tried to pull his head and shoulders up to the level of the parapet.

Bess breathed: “Oh, look at them! He must have torn them terribly climbing up!” Then she pulled away from Sollenar and stood staring at him, her hand to her mouth. “But he *couldn’t* have climbed! We’re so high!”

Sollenar beat at the hands with the heels of his palms, using the direct, trained blows he had learned at his athletic club.

Bone splintered against the stone. When the knuckles were broken the hands instantaneously disappeared, leaving only streaks behind them. Sollenar looked over the parapet. A bundle shrank from sight, silhouetted against the lights of the pedestrian level and the Avenue. It contracted to a pinpoint. Then, when it reached the brook and water flew in all directions, it disappeared in a final sunburst, endowed with glory by the many lights which found momentary reflection down there.

“Bess, leave me! Leave me, please!” Rufus Sollenar cried out.

III

Rufus Sollenar paced his office, his hands held safely still in front of him, their fingers spread and rigid.

The telephone sounded, and his secretary said to him: "Mr. Sollenar, you are ten minutes from being late at the TTV Executives' Ball. This is a First Class obligation."

Sollenar laughed. "I thought it was, when I originally classified it."

"Are you now planning to renege, Mr. Sollenar?" the secretary inquired politely.

Certainly, Sollenar thought. He could as easily renege on the Ball as a king could on his coronation.

"Burr, you scum, what have you done to me?" he asked the air, and the telephone said: "Beg pardon?"

"Tell my valet," Sollenar said. "I'm going." He dismissed the phone. His hands cupped in front of his chest. A firm grip on emptiness might be stronger than any prize in a broken hand.

Carrying in his chest something he refused to admit was terror, Sollenar made ready for the Ball.

But only a few moments after the first dance set had ended, Malcolm Levier of the local TTV station executive staff looked over Sollenar's shoulder and remarked:

"Oh, there's Cort Burr, dressed like a gallows bird."

Sollenar, glittering in the costume of the Medici, did not turn his head. "Is he? What would he want here?"

Levier's eyebrows arched. "He holds a little stock. He has entrée. But he's late." Levier's lips quirked. "It must have taken him some time to get that makeup on."

"Not in good taste, is it?"

"Look for yourself."

"Oh, I'll do better than that," Sollenar said. "I'll go and talk to him a while. Excuse me, Levier." And only then did he

turn around, already started on his first pace toward the man.

But Cortwright Burr was only a pasteboard imitation of himself as Sollenar had come to know him. He stood to one side of the doorway, dressed in black and crimson robes, with black leather gauntlets on his hands, carrying a staff of weathered, natural wood. His face was shadowed by a sackcloth hood, the eyes well hidden. His face was powdered gray, and some blend of livid colors hollowed his cheeks. He stood motionless as Sollenar came up to him.

As he had crossed the floor, each step regular, the eyes of bystanders had followed Sollenar, until, anticipating his course, they found Burr waiting. The noise level of the Ball shrank perceptibly, for the lesser revelers who chanced to be present were sustaining it all alone. The people who really mattered here were silent and watchful.

The thought was that Burr, defeated in business, had come here in some insane reproach to his adversary, in this lugubrious, distasteful clothing. Why, he looked like a corpse. Or worse.

The question was, what would Sollenar say to him? The wish was that Burr would take himself away, back to his estates or to some other city. New York was no longer for Cortwright Burr. But what would Sollenar say to him now, to drive him back to where he hadn't the grace to go willingly?

"Cortwright," Sollenar said in a voice confined to the two of them. "So your Martian immortality works."

Burr said nothing.

"You got that in addition, didn't you? You knew how I'd react. You knew you'd need protection. Paid the Martians to make you physically invulnerable? It's a good system. Very impressive. Who would have thought the Martians knew so much? But who here is going to pay attention to you now?"

Get out of town, Cortwright. You're past your chance. You're dead as far as these people are concerned—all you have left is your skin."

Burr reached up and surreptitiously lifted a corner of his fleshed mask. And there he was, under it. The hood retreated an inch, and the light reached his eyes; and Sollenar had been wrong, Burr had less left than he thought.

"Oh, no, no, Cortwright," Sollenar said softly. "No, you're right—I can't stand up to that."

He turned and bowed to the assembled company. "Good night!" he cried, and walked out of the ballroom.

Someone followed him down the corridor to the elevators. Sollenar did not look behind him.

"I have another appointment with you now," Ermine said at his elbow.

They reached the pedestrian level. Sollenar said: "There's a café. We can talk there."

"Too public, Mr. Sollenar. Let's simply stroll and converse." Ermine lightly took his arm and guided him along the walkway. Sollenar noticed then that Ermine was costumed so cunningly that no one could have guessed the appearance of the man.

"Very well," Sollenar said.

"Of course."

They walked together, casually. Ermine said: "Burr's driving you to your death. Is it because you tried to kill him earlier? Did you get his Martian secret?"

Sollenar shook his head.

"You didn't get it." Ermine sighed. "That's unfortunate. I'll have to take steps."

"Under the By-Laws," Sollenar said, "I cry *laissez faire*."

Ermine looked up, his eyes twinkling. "Laissez faire? Mr. Sollenar, do you have any idea how many of our

members are involved in your fortunes? *They* will cry *laissez faire*, Mr. Sollenar, but clearly you persist in dragging them down with you. No, sir, Mr. Sollenar, my office now forwards an immediate recommendation to the Technical Advisory Committee of the I.A.B. that Mr. Burr probably has a system superior to yours, and that stock in Sollenar, Incorporated, had best be disposed of."

"There's a bench," Sollenar said. "Let's sit down."

"As you wish." Ermine moved beside Sollenar to the bench, but remained standing.

"What is it, Mr. Sollenar?"

"I want your help. You advised me on what Burr had. It's still in his office building, somewhere. You have resources. We can get it."

"*Laissez faire*, Mr. Sollenar. I visited you in an advisory capacity. I can do no more."

"For a partnership in my affairs could you do more?"

"Money?" Ermine tittered. "For me? Do you know the conditions of my employment?"

If he had thought, Sollenar would have remembered. He reached out tentatively. Ermine anticipated him.

Ermine bared his left arm and sank his teeth into it. He displayed the arm. There was no quiver of pain in voice or stance. "It's not a legend, Mr. Sollenar. It's quite true. We of our office must spend a year, after the nerve surgery, learning to walk without the feel of our feet, to handle objects without crushing them or letting them slip, or damaging ourselves. Our mundane pleasures are auditory, olfactory, and visual. Easily gratified at little expense. Our dreams are totally interior, Mr. Sollenar. The operation is irreversible. What would you buy for me with your money?"

"What would I buy for myself?" Sollenar's head sank down between his shoulders.

Ermine bent over him. "Your despair is your own, Mr. Sollenar. I have official business with you."

He lifted Sollenar's chin with a forefinger. "I judge physical interference to be unwarranted at this time. But matters must remain so that the I.A.B. members involved with you can recover the value of their investments in E.V. Is that perfectly clear, Mr. Sollenar? You are hereby enjoined under the By-Laws, as enforced by the Special Public Relations Office." He glanced at his watch. "Notice was served at 1:27 a.m., City time."

"1:27," Sollenar said. "City time." He sprang to his feet and raced down a companionway to the taxi level.

Mr. Ermine watched him quizzically.

He opened his costume, took out his omnipresent medical kit, and sprayed coagulant over the wound in his forearm. Replacing the kit, he adjusted his clothing and strolled down the same companionway Sollenar had run. He raised an arm, and a taxi flittered down beside him. He showed the driver a card, and the cab lifted off with him, its lights glaring in a Priority pattern, far faster than Sollenar's ordinary legal limit allowed.

IV

Long Island Facility vaulted at the stars in great kangaroo-leaps of arch and cantilever span, jeweled in glass and metal as if the entire port were a mechanism for navigating interplanetary space. Rufus Sollenar paced its esplanades, measuring his steps, holding his arms still, for the short time until he could board the Mars rocket.

Erect and majestic, he took a place in the lounge and carefully sipped liqueur, once the liner had boosted away

from Earth and coupled in its Faraday main drives.

Mr. Ermine settled into the place beside him.

Sollenar looked over at him calmly. "I thought so."

Ermine nodded. "Of course you did. But I didn't almost miss you. I was here ahead of you. I have no objection to your going to Mars, Mr. Sollenar. Laissez faire. Provided I can go along."

"Well," Rufus Sollenar said. "Liqueur?" He gestured with his glass.

Ermine shook his head. "No, thank you," he said delicately.

Sollenar said: "Even your tongue?"

"Of course my tongue, Mr. Sollenar. I taste nothing. I touch nothing." Ermine smiled. "But I feel no pressure."

"All right, then," Rufus Sollenar said crisply. "We have several hours to landing time. You sit and dream your interior dreams, and I'll dream mine." He faced around in his chair and folded his arms across his chest.

"Mr. Sollenar," Ermine said gently.

"Yes?"

"I am once again with you by appointment as provided under the By-Laws."

"State your business, Mr. Ermine."

"You are not permitted to lie in an unknown grave, Mr. Sollenar. Insurance policies on your life have been taken out at a high premium rate. The I.A.B. members concerned cannot wait the statutory seven years to have you declared dead. Do what you will, Mr. Sollenar, but I must take care I witness your death. From now on, I am with you wherever you go."

Sollenar smiled. "I don't intend to die. Why should I die, Mr. Ermine?"

"I have no idea, Mr. Sollenar. But I know Cortwright Burr's character. And isn't that he, seated there in the corner? The light is poor, but I think he's recognizable."

Across the lounge, Burr raised his head and looked into Sollenar's eyes. He raised a hand near his face, perhaps

merely to signify greeting. Rufus Sollenar faced front.

“A worthy opponent, Mr. Sollenar,” Ermine said. “A persevering, unforgiving, ingenious man. And yet—” Ermine seemed a little touched by bafflement. “And yet it seems to me, Mr. Sollenar, that he got you running rather easily. What *did* happen between you, after my advisory call?”

Sollenar turned a terrible smile on Ermine. “I shot him to pieces. If you’d peel his face, you’d see.”

Ermine sighed. “Up to this moment, I had thought perhaps you might still salvage your affairs.”

“Pity, Mr. Ermine? Pity for the insane?”

“Interest. I can take no part in your world. Be grateful, Mr. Sollenar. I am not the same gullible man I was when I signed my contract with I.A.B., so many years ago.”

Sollenar laughed. Then he stole a glance at Burr’s corner.

The ship came down at Abernathy Field, in Aresia, the Terrestrial city. Industrialized, prefabricated, jerry-built and clamorous, the storm-proofed buildings huddled, but huddled proudly, at the desert’s edge.

Low on the horizon was the Martian settlement—the buildings so skillfully blended with the landscape, so eroded, so much abandoned that the uninformed eye saw nothing. Sollenar had been to Mars—on a tour. He had seen the natives in their nameless dwelling place; arrogant, venomous and weak. He had been told, by the paid guide, they trafficked with Earthmen as much as they cared to, and kept to their place on the rim of Earth’s encroachment, observing.

“Tell me, Ermine,” Sollenar said quietly as they walked across the terminal lobby. “You’re to kill me, aren’t you, if I try to go on without you?”

“A matter of procedure, Mr. Sollenar,” Ermine said evenly. “We cannot risk the investment capital of so many I.A.B.

members.”

Sollenar sighed. “If I were any other member, how I would commend you, Mr. Ermine! Can we hire a car for ourselves, then, somewhere nearby?”

“Going out to see the engineers?” Ermine asked. “Who would have thought they’d have something valuable for sale?”

“I want to show them something,” Sollenar said.

“What thing, Mr. Sollenar?”

They turned the corner of a corridor, with branching hallways here and there, not all of them busy. “Come here,” Sollenar said, nodding toward one of them.

They stopped out of sight of the lobby and the main corridor. “Come on,” Sollenar said. “A little further.”

“No,” Ermine said. “This is farther than I really wish. It’s dark here.”

“Wise too late, Mr. Ermine,” Sollenar said, his arms flashing out.

One palm impacted against Ermine’s solar plexus, and the other against the muscle at the side of his neck, but not hard enough to kill. Ermine collapsed, starved for oxygen, while Sollenar silently cursed having been cured of murder. Then Sollenar turned and ran.

Behind him Ermine’s body struggled to draw breath by reflex alone.

Moving as fast as he dared, Sollenar walked back and reached the taxi lock, pulling a respirator from a wall rack as he went. He flagged a car and gave his destination, looking behind him. He had seen nothing of Cortwright Burr since setting foot on Mars. But he knew that soon or late, Burr would find him.

A few moments later Ermine got to his feet. Sollenar’s car was well away. Ermine shrugged and went to the local broadcasting station.

He commandeered a private desk, a firearm and immediate time on the I.A.B. interoffice circuit to Earth.

When his call acknowledgement had come back to him from his office there, he reported:

“Sollenar is enroute to the Martian city. He wants a duplicate of Burr’s device, of course, since he smashed the original when he killed Burr. I’ll follow and make final disposition. The disorientation I reported previously is progressing rapidly. Almost all his responses now are inappropriate. On the flight out, he seemed to be staring at something in an empty seat. Quite often when spoken to he obviously hears something else entirely. I expect to catch one of the next few flights back.”

There was no point in waiting for comment to wend its way back from Earth. Ermine left. He went to a cab rank and paid the exorbitant fee for transportation outside Aresian city limits.

Close at hand, the Martian city was like a welter of broken pots. Shards of wall and roof joined at savage angles and pointed to nothing. Underfoot, drifts of vitreous material, shaped to fit no sane configuration, and broken to fit such a mosaic as no church would contain, rocked and slid under Sollenar’s hurrying feet.

What from Aresia had been a solid front of dun color was here a façade of red, green and blue splashed about centuries ago and since then weathered only enough to show how bitter the colors had once been. The plum-colored sky stretched over all this like a frigid membrane, and the wind blew and blew.

Here and there, as he progressed, Sollenar saw Martian arms and heads protruding from the rubble. Sculptures.

He was moving toward the heart of the city, where some few unbroken structures persisted. At the top of a heap of shards he turned to look behind him. There was the dust-plume of his cab, returning to the city. He expected to walk

back—perhaps to meet someone on the road, all alone on the Martian plain if only Ermine would forebear from interfering. Searching the flat, thin-aired landscape, he tried to pick out the plodding dot of Cortwright Burr. But not yet.

He turned and ran down the untrustworthy slope.

He reached the edge of the maintained area. Here the rubble was gone, the ancient walks swept, the statues kept upright on their pediments. But only broken walls suggested the fronts of the houses that had stood here. Knifing their sides up through the wind-rippled sand that only constant care kept off the street, the shadow-houses fenced his way and the sculptures were motionless as hope. Ahead of him, he saw the buildings of the engineers. There was no heap to climb and look to see if Ermine followed close behind.

Sucking his respirator, he reached the building of the Martian engineers.

A sounding strip ran down the doorjamb. He scratched his fingernails sharply along it, and the magnified vibration, ducted throughout the hollow walls, rattled his plea for entrance.

V

The door opened, and Martians stood looking. They were spindly-limbed and slight, their faces framed by folds of leathery tissue. Their mouths were lipped with horn as hard as dentures, and pursed, forever ready to masticate. They were pleasant neither to look at nor, Sollonar knew, to deal with. But Cortwright Burr had done it. And Sollonar needed to do it.

“Does anyone here speak English?” he asked.

“I,” said the central Martian, his mouth opening to the sound, closing to end the reply.

“I would like to deal with you.”

“Whenever,” the Martian said, and the group at the doorway parted deliberately to let Sollenar in.

Before the door closed behind him, Sollenar looked back. But the rubble of the abandoned sectors blocked his line of sight into the desert.

“What can you offer? And what do you want?” the Martian asked. Sollenar stood half-ringed by them, in a room whose corners he could not see in the uncertain light.

“I offer you Terrestrial currency.”

The English-speaking Martian—the Martian who had admitted to speaking English—turned his head slightly and spoke to his fellows. There were clacking sounds as his lips met. The others reacted variously, one of them suddenly gesturing with what seemed a disgusted flip of his arm before he turned without further word and stalked away, his shoulders looking like the shawled back of a very old and very hungry woman.

“What did Burr give you?” Sollenar asked.

“Burr.” The Martian cocked his head. His eyes were not multifaceted, but gave that impression.

“He was here and he dealt with you. Not long ago. On what basis?”

“Burr. Yes. Burr gave us currency. We will take currency from you. For the same thing we gave him?”

“For immortality, yes.”

“Im—This is a new word.”

“Is it? For the secret of not dying?”

“Not dying? You think we have not-dying for sale here?” The Martian spoke to the others again. Their lips clattered. Others left, like the first one had, moving with great precision and very slow step, and no remaining tolerance for Sollenar.

Sollenar cried out: “What did you sell him, then?”

The principal engineer said: "We made an entertainment device for him."

"A little thing. This size." Sollonar cupped his hands.

"You have seen it, then."

"Yes. And nothing more? That was all he bought here?"

"It was all we had to sell—or give. We don't yet know whether Earthmen will give us things in exchange for currency. We'll see, when we next need something from Aresia."

Sollonar demanded: "How did it work? This thing you sold him."

"Oh, it lets people tell stories to themselves."

Sollonar looked closely at the Martian. "What kind of stories?"

"Any kind," the Martian said blandly. "Burr told us what he wanted. He had drawings with him of an Earthman device that used pictures on a screen, and broadcast sounds, to carry the details of the story told to the auditor."

"He stole those patents! He couldn't have used them on Earth."

"And why should he? Our device needs to convey no precise details. Any mind can make its own. It only needs to be put into a situation, and from there it can do all the work. If an auditor wishes a story of contact with other sexes, for example, the projector simply makes it seem to him, the next time he is with the object of his desire, that he is getting positive feedback—that he is arousing a similar response in that object. Once that has been established for him, the auditor may then leave the machine, move about normally, conduct his life as usual—but always in accordance with the basic situation. It is, you see, in the end a means of introducing system into his view of reality. Of course, his society must understand that he is not in accord

with reality, for some of what he does cannot seem rational from an outside view of him. So some care must be taken, but not much. If many such devices were to enter his society, soon the circumstances would become commonplace, and the society would surely readjust to allow for it," said the English-speaking Martian.

"The machine creates any desired situation in the auditor's mind?"

"Certainly. There are simple predisposing tapes that can be inserted as desired. Love, adventure, cerebration—it makes no difference."

Several of the bystanders clacked sounds out to each other. Sollenar looked at them narrowly. It was obvious there had to be more than one English-speaker among these people.

"And the device you gave Burr," he asked the engineer, neither calmly nor hopefully. "What sort of stories could its auditors tell themselves?"

The Martian cocked his head again. It gave him the look of an owl at a bedroom window. "Oh, there was one situation we were particularly instructed to include. Burr said he was thinking ahead to showing it to an acquaintance of his.

"It was a situation of adventure; of adventure with the fearful. And it was to end in loss and bitterness." The Martian looked even more closely at Sollenar. "Of course, the device does not specify details. No one but the auditor can know what fearful thing inhabits his story, or precisely how the end of it would come. You would, I believe, be Rufus Sollenar? Burr spoke of you and made the noise of laughing."

Sollenar opened his mouth. But there was nothing to say.

"You want such a device?" the Martian asked. "We've prepared several since Burr left. He spoke of machines that

would manufacture them in astronomical numbers. We, of course, have done our best with our poor hands.”

Sollenar said: “I would like to look out your door.”

“Pleasure.”

Sollenar opened the door slightly. Mr. Ermine stood in the cleared street, motionless as the shadow buildings behind him. He raised one hand in a gesture of unfelt greeting as he saw Sollenar, then put it back on the stock of his rifle.

Sollenar closed the door, and turned to the Martian. “How much currency do you want?”

“Oh, all you have with you. You people always have a good deal with you when you travel.”

Sollenar plunged his hands into his pockets and pulled out his billfold, his change, his keys, his jeweled radio; whatever was there, he rummaged out onto the floor, listening to the sound of rolling coins.

“I wish I had more here,” he laughed. “I wish I had the amount that man out there is going to recover when he shoots me.”

The Martian engineer cocked his head. “But your dream is over, Mr. Sollenar,” he clacked drily. “Isn’t it?”

“Quite so. But you to your purposes and I to mine. Now give me one of those projectors. And set it to predispose a situation I am about to specify to you. Take however long it needs. The audience is a patient one.” He laughed, and tears gathered in his eyes.

Mr. Ermine waited, isolated from the cold, listening to hear whether the rifle stock was slipping out of his fingers. He had no desire to go into the Martian building after Sollenar and involve third parties. All he wanted was to put Sollenar’s body under a dated marker, with as little trouble as possible.

Now and then he walked a few paces backward and forward, to keep from losing muscular control at his

extremities because of low skin temperature. Sollenar must come out soon enough. He had no food supply with him, and though Ermine did not like the risk of engaging a man like Sollenar in a starvation contest, there was no doubt that a man with no taste for fuel could outlast one with the acquired reflexes of eating.

The door opened and Sollenar came out.

He was carrying something. Perhaps a weapon. Ermine let him come closer while he raised and carefully sighted his rifle. Sollenar might have some Martian weapon or he might not. Ermine did not particularly care. If Ermine died, he would hardly notice it—far less than he would notice a botched ending to a job of work already roiled by Sollenar's break away at the space field. If Ermine died, some other S.P.R.O. agent would be assigned almost immediately. No matter what happened, S.P.R.O. would stop Sollenar before he ever reached Abernathy Field.

So there was plenty of time to aim an unhurried, clean shot.

Sollenar was closer, now. He seemed to be in a very agitated frame of mind. He held out whatever he had in his hand.

It was another one of the Martian entertainment machines. Sollenar seemed to be offering it as a token to Ermine. Ermine smiled.

"What can you offer me, Mr. Sollenar?" he said, and shot.

The golden ball rolled away over the sand. "There, now," Ermine said. "*Now*, wouldn't you sooner be me than you? And where is the thing that made the difference between us?"

He shivered. He was chilly. Sand was blowing against his tender face, which had been somewhat abraded during his long wait.

He stopped, transfixed.

He lifted his head.

Then, with a great swing of his arms, he sent the rifle whirling away. "The wind!" he sighed into the thin air. "I feel the wind." He leapt into the air, and sand flew away from his feet as he landed. He whispered to himself: "I feel the ground!"

He stared in trembling joy at Sollenar's empty body. "What have you given me?" Full of his own rebirth, he swung his head up at the sky again, and cried in the direction of the Sun: "Oh, you squeezing, nibbling people who made me incorruptible and thought that was the end of me!"

With love he buried Sollenar, and with reverence he put up the marker, but he had plans for what he might accomplish with the facts of this transaction, and the myriad others he was privy to.

A sharp bit of pottery had penetrated the sole of his shoe and gashed his foot, but he, not having seen it, hadn't felt it. Nor would he see it or feel it even when he changed his stockings; for he had not noticed the wound when it was made. It didn't matter. In a few days it would heal, though not as rapidly as if it had been properly attended to.

Vaguely, he heard the sound of Martians clacking behind their closed door as he hurried out of the city, full of revenge, and reverence for his savior.

THE RAG AND BONE MEN

The other one—Charpantier, he called himself—he and I were going back up the hill to the Foundation, carrying our bags, when I happened to remark I didn't think the Veld was sane anymore. (I call myself Maurer.)

Charpantier said nothing for a moment. We kept walking, up the gravel path between the unimaginatively clipped hedges. But he was frowning a little, and after a while he said in an absent way: "Now, how would one determine that?" He looked straight into my eyes, which is something that has always upset me, and challenged: "I don't think one could."

I felt the shock of inadequacy. Words come out of me—perfectly accurate words, I know; but I never know how, and sometimes when asked I forget.

Now I must be very lucid; I must be his kind of man, I thought, and picked my way among my words. "These things he's had us get," I said, putting the burlap bag down and stopping so as to hold Charpantier in one place.

"He wants to build something un-Earthly," Charpantier said, annoyed because I was playing his kind of trick on him, and so baldly. "What standards do you propose to judge by?"

But I was right and he was wrong. Now it remained to make him see how. "Yes. He wants to build something un-Earthly. Out of Earthly parts. He wants to take six radio tubes for an Earthly radio, three pieces of Earthly Lucite exactly $\frac{1}{4}$ Earthly inch thick, a roll of Earthly 16-gauge wire, a General

Electric heat lamp, and all these other things—the polystyrene foam blocks, the polyurethane plastic sheeting, the polyvinyl insulating tape; what have you in your bag, Charpantier? Out of all this, he wants to make a Veldish thing.”

“He’s spent years learning about Earthly things,” Charpantier pointed out. “For years, we’ve brought him books. Men. Everything he needs. Now he’s learned what the Earthly equivalents of Veldish materials are, and he’s ready to make his new transporter.” Charpantier had a dark face—dark hair, dark beard, dark eyes. When his dark brows drew together it was easy to see that his best expression was dark scorn.

“I think he’s desperate,” I said. “I think he’s learned all he can. He’s learned what the nearest Earthly equivalents to Veldish things are. And he’s learned that all Earth can give him nothing closer. I don’t see how he could do better. Even he. You cannot make apples of cabbages. But he wants to get home—you know he wants so much to leave here and get home—and now he’s desperate, and is going to try making a new transporter out of materials nothing like those in the one that broke and marooned him here.”

“And it won’t function?” Charpantier asked. “There is that risk. But why shouldn’t he try? What’s insane in that?”

“I fear it might work. I fear it might work in ways a transporter should not.” And I shivered, for if I say something I feel it, and I do not feel anything I don’t believe is right. I have been wrong, but not often... or perhaps I forget.

Charpantier smiled. “How should a Veld transporter work?”

“That’s not the point!” I cried at Charpantier’s obstinacy in being Charpantier. “I don’t have to know. The Veld has to know, and be insane enough to try something different.

Look—” I said, searching, being my own kind of man, now, and letting the words come straight from the images in my head. “Assume a man. Assume a man stranded on an island, for years. Assume he has ways of realizing his heart’s desire, if only he can find the things to work with. But it’s a small island. And while it’s a good island how can it give a marooned man not only comfort but heart’s desire? He searches. He perhaps send messengers, if he himself cannot penetrate the jungle; such messengers as he can command. And, in the end, after years, he knows he cannot have exactly what he wants. But he can have something very near it. So, in the end, he takes a rag, and a bone, and a hank of hair—”

“And makes a woman?” Charpantier laughed. “If he fails, what of it?”

“But if he succeeds, Charpantier! If he *succeeds!*” Couldn’t he see? “What sort of woman?”

Charpantier looked at me for a moment, but I hadn’t made him see. He saw only me, and I had taken up his time without delivering value. So he chastised me.

“The Veld made me and you. Are you dissatisfied?”

He had that trick, Charpantier. If you tried to give him a problem he couldn’t solve, he gave you a greater problem of your own, to add to the one you already carried.

I picked up my bag and followed him up the hill to the Foundation, where the Veld timelessly waited.

It was dusk, and as I walked I turned my eyes up to the stars. One eye was larger than the other, and a different color. My nose sat askew on my lumpen face. Though Charpantier was a hunchback, and lacked a finger, still he was a handsome hunchback. But I, whom the Veld had made second, with Charpantier’s example, was merely whole. And from my eyes, tears.

We entered the Foundation. It had been erected around the Veld, when he first came and there were men who could question.

Now the building was neat and kept up, but all its many rooms were empty, and all its many machines were still. Charpantier had his cottage on the West—a very learned man had used it, while working with the Veld—and I had mine on the East, where a military commander had kept his family.

The Veld lived in the heart of the Foundation, in the odd-shaped room whose walls traced the configuration he had been forced to assume when his broken transporter had interrupted his journey between—where?—and the home he pined for. Men came from the town below the hill to care for the building, but Charpantier or I had to go fetch them. They no longer questioned. They distressed us with their constant need for commanding, and so every time they were finished with their work we commanded them homeward. No Earthly creature lived on the hill.

The Veld was kindly, but an end comes to kindness. The time came when the questioning of men would have led them, if answered, irrevocably into Veldish ways.

It was perhaps a kindness, too, that the Veld did what he did to questioning creatures. But however it may have been, now there were only men to be commanded. Charpantier commanded in the West, and I in the East, and the Veld, though he permitted us to question all men, and each other, commanded us.

Charpantier and I did not often speak to each other while in the Foundation. We were too near the Veld, and insufficiently full of ourselves. But as we rode down the elevator, with its noise of metal sliding all alone in the world, Charpantier looked at me. And I knew what he looked.

I have thought to myself that Charpantier says of everything: “Why is this thing not perfect?” while I say to myself: “Where is the perfection in this thing?” Surely my

thought is as potent as his. But you see his advantage over me, for he was forever safe from what I might look at him, but I, I was not safe.

We reached the chamber of the Veld. We opened the door and displayed our accumulation to his perceptions.

“My-being reflects you,” the Veld told us from his perception, and seeing that he was become beautiful, I knew we had done well. “Now will I make, and take my way, and you in your sorrow stay to see the world restored.”

This was as he had promised the world, and us, before he put an end to questioning. Though only we remembered. But I wondered—I did not question; I wondered—as I imagined his making of the new transporter, taking my imagined thing from what I knew of how he had made us; I wondered whether the world was safe.

I thought of the chamber beside this one, where we had been born. I had often been there, only to look. There is the tank—the Rochester, Minnesota, Biophysical Equipment Co. tank. And there is the Velikaya Socialisticheskaya Rossiya coagulator, and the I.B.M. 704, and the Braun, Boveri heater. There stand the cabinets, with their Torsen, Held Artztmetal refrigeration units. And the cabinets stand full of flasks and ampules, and there is the autoclave full of Becton-Dickinson Yale syringes, and dangling from the wall are the Waldos the Veld used to manipulate all these things.

And of all these Earthly things, the Veld made men not entirely Earthly, for the Veld is a Veld.

Now soon, the new transporter would take the Veld away—in ways I wondered were perilous—and it would be Charpantier and I who stayed to see the world restored.

Charpantier and I, who called ourselves, but had no names.

He commanded us to go and we went, I East, Charpantier West. I saw Charpantier hurry down his side of the hill, handsome and hasty under the stars. I walked—for me, to run is to risk—and I trembled, for me to feel is to know, and

the Veld was desperate. He slept at night, secure from questions even though he slept, for his power once exercised was irrevocable so long as he existed. But tonight he did not sleep; he made.

I thought of my assumed man, on his assumed island, red-eyed and tremulous of hand, bent over his pot, stirring, stirring, unable to wait for morning. I thought of the light from his fire, shining on the dumb eyes of his faithful messengers waiting at the edge of his clearing. The messengers are dismissed from service, yet not quite sure they are dismissed. And I thought of this Earth, and the Veld's old promise to us that tomorrow it would wake knuckling its eyes, and need a loving voice to say there was an end to nightmares.

I would speak and Charpantier would speak, but what would we say? And in what voices, born of the Veld's touch on the Waldos? And would there be more than speaking to do?

I did not think there was much I could do but speak. Charpantier lacks a finger, but I... I have hands, but I lack them.

Oh, but the stars were cold! The Moon in this season was a day Moon, and now below the horizon. Stars, stars and galaxies, but beyond them, where the Veldish beings lived, nothing I could see, and below the stars, too, here where I reached the brow of the hill and clumsily opened my wings, here, too, nothing, as I lurched into the night and in great strain beat toward the places of men.

I had a favorite place; the place I had chosen to begin to speak from. It was small, as men measure things—a few lights in the darkness, here the sheen of a lake, there the tiered wooliness of trees—a town in which I had disposed those men who must first unbind themselves from the years

of no questioning. For unlike the Veld and his transporter—and even the Veld needed a transporter—Charpantier and I could not be everywhere.

It was my thought to reassure these men first, and have them go out and reassure others, as older brothers will soothe the younger in the night. I knew from an old argument that Charpantier planned the same. But, of course, they would not be the same sort of men for Charpantier as for me.

Still, they were all men. Once they had all rubbed the sleep from their eyes they would tell each other what they saw, and in the end all men would have agreed on the shape of the world, so it would not matter what imperfections Charpantier pointed out, or what implicit glories I perceived.

If the Veld's hand did not tremble as he stirred his pot.

And yet it had—it had; Charpantier had said more than he thought, when he thought to stop up my mouth with myself.

I faced away from the Foundation, now mile on mile behind me. But my eyes turned inward, and in me my mind hovered over the Veld. I had no actual distant eye—no way of seeing beyond the curve of the world or through the haze of the air; no ear to listen to a sound so far away it cannot urge the molecules of air my pinions grope at. But often it is well enough to think, for any thought seems accurate enough to act on, and in time thoughts grow so practiced that they might well be eyes. And so I saw the Veld, though I did not see him, and I saw him falter.

In me, the Veld suddenly told: "I have made, and I go. Forgive me for your sorrow." And I forgave him, as I had forgiven him long ago. For his duty was to men, not to ourselves who were part of that duty. And Charpantier, I knew, had nothing to forgive, for he was glad of his sorrow.

The wind numbed my eyes. I wept.

Under the cold stars, my crude cheeks glistened. I hovered over the town, where some men slept and some men

worked, because some machines run during the day and some run at night, and I listened for anything else the Veld might have to tell, for he was my irrevocable commander as long as he existed on this Earth. I also listened with the ear of habituated thought.

And I heard. In my mind's eye, I saw the Veld use the Earthly transporter, but it was not with my mind's ear alone that I heard what I heard.

The pot erupts. The stranded man claws back in agony so great he cannot even scream, arms, legs and face smoldering, and jounces on the ground, to lie, to moan, to be a long mindless time dying. And at the clearing's edge the little messengers have no one to say what could be done to soothe him.

What now? Where to go, what to do, how to repair?

Oh, Veld, Veld, long-living Veld, what truly eternal sorrow!

I sank down through the air, bereft and graceless. What could I do for the Veld? All that remained to me was what I could say to men. But I knew as I landed among them that the Veld's promise could not be kept, since the Veld was still here.

I cried out to the men: "Awake! Arise!" They stumbled out of their houses, but when I said to the first of them: "Question me!" he obediently answered: "How?"

I go back to where the Foundation was, now and then. I bring doctors with me, after each time it seems to me I have found a way to tell them what to seek. The Veld lies where his chamber was, before the stone decayed, and tells me nothing.

If he truly reflects me, as he is now, then I don't know if I can bear to wait for the day when I can dash myself down from the outraged air and surrender myself to the sea-speckled rocks. The doctors say that if only someone would

tell them what questions to ask about the Veld, and if only someone would give them the answers to the questions, they might be able to do something.

Charpantier is there sometimes, and mocks me. “You’re getting crazier every day, Maurer,” he says. “Suppose you restore the Veld? Then what? Does he make another transporter?” He shakes his head. “Poor Maurer. What’re you doing to these people you bring here? What do you want from them? Something the Veld himself couldn’t accomplish?”

I try. I try to tell them how to question, and I command them to question. And I hope the Veld dies. But though Charpantier and I—even Charpantier and I—are growing a little older, the Veld is only moribund, and no more dead than he was before the days when thirty generations of men battled to keep the southernmost edge of the creeping ice from burying the Veld beyond the reach of hope.

For I hope—though I can see a sprig of silver, here and there, in Charpantier’s darkness now. The Veld must be accessible to my hope, though I must command millions of men.

And I think Charpantier hopes, too, because so long as he can see me failing he knows I am imperfect, but he wishes perfection for me. I know he brings no doctors only because he has not yet found a way for a man to respond to the command, “Be perfect!”

Each time the hope dies, I tell my men: “Go home, now. Rest.” And they go home. But I? I blunder about, thinking that perhaps if I could kill the Veld, that would be an end to it. But nothing can kill the Veld, unless it be something the Veld knows of. So first we must heal the Veld. And healed he will once again seek his heart’s desire, hopelessly. As do I. As do I.

DIE, SHADOW!

I

I've come a long, long way to die alone, David Greaves thought as *Defiance* tumbled through the misty shroud of Venus, hopelessly torn apart by the explosion in her engines. On the console in front of him, the altimeter was one of the last few meaningful instruments, and it told him there were only a few tortured miles remaining before the ship he had brought this far—had spent his fortune in building when no government would yet consider risking a manned rocket on his flight—would smash down to its doom on a planet no man had ever walked.

Battered and tossed in his seat by the ship's crazy tumbling, Greaves tensed the oak-hard muscles of his arms and thrust himself up to his feet. He wasn't dead yet. He wasn't dead and, if the slim chance paid off, he'd still be present to laugh in the government's face when the first, safe, cautious official venture finally made its way across the emptiness between Earth and the Sun's second planet.

Dragging himself from handhold to handhold, his tendons cracking with the strain, he levered himself toward the Crash Capsule, forced open its hatch and pulled himself through, while the winds of Venus tore at the shattered hull and the scream of *Defiance's* passage through the murky sky rose to a savage howl.

Outside the cloud-lashed hull there were no stars. Below, no one knew what sort of jungle, or sea, or desert of whipping poison sand might lie in wait. Greaves had not cared when he set out, and did not care now. If men had always waited to be sure, if all the adventurers of mankind had waited until the signposts had gone up, the cave bears would still be the dominant form of life on Earth, and races undreamed of might never know such a thing as man to contest their sway over the Universe.

I'll live to see my share of that, Greaves thought as he pulled the capsule's hatch shut and dropped into the special padding that, in theory, would cushion much of the impact. *Or else I'll know I tried.* He tripped the lever that would flood the capsule with Doctor Eckstrom's special anesthetic—the experimental compound that might—just barely, might—offer a chance.

As the hiss of the yellow-tinged, acrid gas became louder and louder in his ears, David Greaves thought again of the almost obsessive lengths to which he had gone in making sure that there would be such a thing as the capsule. The entire project—the decision to build the ship, to sacrifice for it the personal fortune he had built up in his meteoric rise from obscurity to being one of the world's most dynamic and certainly youngest industrialists—had been marked by his fanatical persistence and dedication. But that dream had come first, and the fortune second—the sole purpose of his career, from its very beginnings when he was only another engineer test pilot, had simply been to accumulate the means so *Defiance* could be built. But the ship had been three-quarters complete when he conceived the idea for the capsule. He could not even now remember exactly when or how he had decided that he must have some device aboard that would protect him from a crash and—here was the vital

thing he insisted upon—keep him alive, no matter how injured, no matter how long might be necessary, until rescuers could reach him.

For him to even think in terms of rescuers—of depending on others—was totally uncharacteristic. For him to divert a major portion of his dwindling resources from work on the ship itself, and push toward the elaborate design of the capsule, was, in some lights, again uncharacteristically foolish. But he had done it, and now...

... Now the anesthetic created by the man some said was a medical genius and some said was a quack had flooded over him.

He could feel the first effect—the calm, the drowsy peace. By the time the *Defiance* smashed into the ground—very soon now—his metabolism would have slowed to a carefully metered rate. It would take hours for his heart to beat once. To him it would seem as if each day was only a few minutes. The jagged nerve-flashes of pain would be only a faraway slow tingle; the blink of an eye would encompass hours of actual time, and he would lie here, safe, asleep, until the hatch was opened and he was taken out into the air, where slowly the effects would wear off.

Meanwhile, there was more than enough gas compressed into the capsule's tanks to keep him perfectly relaxed for a hundred years. The valve—a simple device he had sketched out in five minutes, as if the design had been part of his mind for years—would continue to meter out the supply at the optimum rate and pressure.

It was only now—perhaps a hundred feet from impact, perhaps only a hundred hairsbreadths—that he suddenly saw the flaw in the design.

He struggled to reach the valve, in a useless reflex, for there would have been nothing he could have done, no matter how much time remained. Then he fell back, a twisted grin on his face. *I've come a long, long way to trap myself*, he laughed in his drowsing mind, as the ship

crashed, and the capsule, torn from *Defiance's* side, rebounded like a cannon shell from Heaven upon the outraged soil of Venus, and the overhead clouds sprang into flamed reflection from the blast of *Defiance's* end.

In the capsule, the valve controlling the flow from the illogically copious supply of anesthetic snapped off cleanly. David Greaves' lungs jolted to the impact as a century's dosage of the high-pressure gas delivered its one giant hammerblow of sleep.... Of sleep like death....

Of sleep so slow, so majestic, that only the eternally ageless body might testify to life. Of sleep without end, without motion, until....

II

The woman—the sensuous ivory-skinned woman with eyes like dark jewels and hair like midnight framing her red-lipped face—kissed him again and then drew back to touch his cheek.

“Wake,” she whispered softly. “Wake, sleeper.”

David Greaves looked up at her through slowly dawning eyes. The scent of spices was in his nostrils. As the woman's hair brushed his face again, the fragrance increased.

“My name is David Greaves,” he said, and looked up at the sky and then around him.

There was now no envelope of cloud to hide the face of this planet from the Sun; no such shroud as had concealed the Venus of his day in dazzling white without and muffled it in somber black within. This sky was ruddy, ruddy with the light of the day's last moments, and the clouds through which the sunset burned were only crayon-strokes of ochre across the orange sky.

He lay in state, facing that sunset, on some sort of black metal couch which supported him on a multitude of sweeping, back-bent arms. Beneath him, a dozen low broad steps of olive-green polished stone led down to a long forum, flagged with the same gold-veined, masterfully fitted paving. Around the court ran a low wall, again of stone; friezed, and burnished to a dull glow. From the wall, tall slim pillars thrust into the air.

And atop each pillar, cast and carved in black metal washed by the lingering light, crouched a monster.

No single artist could have created such a bestiary of gargoyles. Some he could trace in their evolution—the vulpine, the crustacean, the insectile. Fangs and pincers slit the cool, invigorating breeze that flowed over the court. Antennae quivered and hummed in the air, and a myriad legs were poised in tension, forever prepared to leap. Others were beyond any creation he knew of—limbs and wings contorted into shapes that had, undoubtedly, been taken by living things... in lives unimaginable to any man. And all of them, imaginable or not, faced toward him forever.

At the foot of each pillar, mounted in a cresset on the wall at its base, burned a torch. And so, when night fell, then the shadows of all these monsters would be cast upward onto the stars, and he would lie sleeping in the pooled light of the torches, while all around him these creatures stood watch.

How many nights had he lain here? How many centuries to wash the fog of sleep out of every nook and cranny of his lungs, when each breath might take a thousand years—ten thousand?

But he was not done with studying his surroundings. He had heard sound when he turned his head. Now the sound was a rising murmur as he lifted his shoulders to look down the length of the court of monsters toward the far end. There

were people there. They had been seated on stone tiers that rose up toward a colonnaded temple. There he could see an altar through the open sides and, on that altar, a flame that burned bright and unwinking against the outline of the lowering Sun.

The people were rising to their feet. From them came an open-throated murmur that became a cry of savage joy—of unbearable tension finding release.

“Who are they?” he asked the woman as he sat up and felt his body stretch with power cramped too long, as he squared back his shoulders and peered through the twilight in the court of monsters.

“Your worshippers, David Greaves,” she said, standing beside him among the many arms of his couch. “The people whose last hope you are.” She added softly: “My name, though you did not ask, is Adelle.” She paused. “I, too, am one of your worshippers. Wherever there are human beings, throughout the Universe, you are worshipped.”

He looked at her more closely. There was a lift to one black-winged eyebrow that was less reverent than a god might like, though a man could have no quarrel with it. She stood gracefully on sandaled feet, dressed in a single white garment girdled around her waist by a belt made of the same metal in which the monsters were cast. He saw that the clasp was shaped into a profile of his own face. And he saw from the wear that it showed that it was old—older than she could be, older perhaps than this court. This... shrine? He wondered how many priestesses had worn that belt.

How many of *his* priestesses.

He frowned and got down, feeling the touch of the day-warmed stone on his bare feet. He was dressed, he saw, in a black kilt and nothing else. He returned his glance to the worshippers and saw that the men were dressed similarly, and that the women wore flowing, calf-length, translucently light robes like Adelle's.

There was motion at one corner of his eye, and he turned his head sharply to see the arms of the couch sweeping down, folding and bending against its sides. Now he saw that he had been cradled in the arms of a great black metal beast. It crouched atop the dais. Its head was bent supplicatingly, bright oily metal barely visible at the joinings of its mechanical body.

He glanced quickly up at the monsters atop their columns. "Are they all like that?" he asked Adelle.

An old man's gruff voice answered him from the other side of the beast-couch. "They won't spring down to devour you—you needn't be afraid of *that*." Two men came into view, one old, one young and very slim. The old one rapped the couch with his knuckles. "This tended you in your sleep. It is made in the shape of the most ferocious race that ever rivaled Man. It is now extinct—as are all those others up there, for the same reason."

The thin young man—very pale, very long of limb—stretched his broad, tight mouth into a smile that covered half his face without mirth. "*Not* the most ferocious, Vigil."

"Your kind will learn about that," the old man snapped.

"Not from you and yours," the slim man said lightly.

Greaves turned to Adelle, who waited, poised, while old Vigil and the young man quarreled. "Tell me the situation," Greaves said.

Adelle's lips parted. But the old man interrupted.

"The situation is that you have been awakened needlessly and would best go back to sleep at once. My daughter and these fanatical sheep—" he waved an angry arm at the standing worshippers—"have forced me to permit this. But in fact Humanity neither needs you nor wants you awake."

"Oh, on the contrary," the young man said. "Humanity needs its gods very badly at this hour. But you are only a man, not so?"

Greaves looked from one to the other—the leather-skinned old man with his mop of ringleted white hair, the young one

who was human in appearance but somehow claimed some other status. "Who are you two?"

"I am Vigil, your guardian, and this is—"

"I am Mayron of The Shadows," the young man said, and he held himself as carelessly as before, but his face looked directly into Greaves's. "See my eyes."

There was nothing there. Only darkness speckled by pinpoints of light; thick, sooty darkness like oil smoke, and sharp lights that burned through it without illuminating it.

"Mayron that was First of Men," Vigil said bitterly.

"Mayron that is First of Shadows," the empty-skinned thing replied proudly, and began to weep great, black tears that soon emptied it, so that the skin drooped down into a huddle on the pave and a black cloud in the shape of a man stood sparkling in the dusk before Greaves. "Mayron that will again be First of Men, when all men are shadows. Mayron that is already First of many men. And which of us is a god, David Greaves?"

Adelie's face glowed with excitement. Her red lips were parted breathlessly. The crowd on the tiers had loosed a great, wailing moan, which hung over the court of conquered monsters as the first stars became visible on the far horizon.

Greaves took a deep breath. He could feel his body tensing itself, the muscles rippling, as though his hide needed comfort.

"Which of us is a god, man?" Mayron repeated softly, his voice coming from the entire cloud. "What is it you can do against me, you whose entire virtue rests on doing nothing?"

"That would depend on what was expected of me at this moment," Greaves said.

“This moment?” Mayron chuckled. “At *this* moment, nothing.”

“In that case, get out of my court and come back when there’s something to do.”

Mayron laughed, throwing his head back, the laughter high and insolent. “How like a god! How very like the real thing.”

Greaves frowned. “If you were a man, once, you might remember how that feels.” But the laugh had bothered him.

“Oh, I remember, I remember. And tomorrow we fight, man.” Laughing, Mayron bent and picked up the skin he had discarded. He crumpled it by the waist in one fist, and brandished it negligently at the worshippers. They shrank back with a moan of horror as he strode toward the far wall. At the wall, he flipped the white, fluttering thing over, and as a cloud passed through the stone. Perhaps on the other side he put on his human form again. Greaves could not tell. The sun was down, and only a little light glowed on the far horizon. The torches guttered in the court of monsters, and the worshippers were hurrying up the steps, out through the temple and away.

III

Greaves, Adelle and Vigil stood beside the beast-couch. “All right,” Greaves said. “Now there are things I want to know, and I want no quarrels, Vigil.”

“And by what right do you order me around?” the old man growled. “You may be a god to some, but you are not *my* god.”

“You owe it to me, atheist. If I was awakened today, at this pat moment, I could have been awakened before. I wasn’t.

You kept me asleep, guardian, when I could have been free as any other man. So you owe me.”

The old man grunted. “You’re brave with Mayron and brave with me. But all men are brave, each in his own way. We need no gods.”

“But you have one.”

Adelie touched his arm. “You have lived from the beginning of human history. And you were a great hero. That much the legends tell us. You were braver than any man, and for your bravery, you could not die. While other heroes conquered the stars and, in their time, died, you lived on. While enemy after enemy was beaten by Man, and the victorious men died, you lived on. The stars and all worlds became ours. Men loved and begat, and men died, but you lived on. It seemed to us that as long as you lived, all men would have something to remember—how great Man is; what the reward of courage can be. It seemed only fitting that we should bring to you the trophies of our achievements. It seemed only right to believe that you had survived to some purpose—that a day would come when Man would need his greatest hero.”

“Precisely,” Vigil snorted. “Man worships nothing but himself. You were a convenient symbol. It did no harm. It may have done some good. Of course, the chuckleheads took it all literally. And so—thanks to Man’s stupid persistence in breeding idiots as well as men with some brains, you, whoever you are, whatever kind of filibustering bravo you actually were, have become the focus of a cult populated by the credulous, the neurotic and those who profit by them. I hope you are grateful for your legacy!”

Greaves looked up at the stars. There were some constellations that might have been the ones he knew, distorted by his transit to another viewpoint... or by time. He was no astronomer.

I’ve come a long way, he thought, and I wonder what the end of it will be. “Those who profit from the credulous,

hmm?" he said to Vigil.

"I am your guardian and I guarded you. As many others have done before me, from various motives. This is not your first court, nor your tenth. The ritual around you is compounded from thousands of years of hogwash, as witness my worshipful daughter who inherits a post from some time when every venturing hero had to have a leman patiently awaiting his return. My duties no doubt were originally medical. But the couch has been attending to that—with some exceptions—for centuries. And you may be assured, Man's history has not been one unbroken triumph, nor his civilization any steady upward climb. But we built while you slumbered. I had thought to prevent your besmirching Man's greatness with your cheap legend."

"Or perhaps he was afraid of the god he denies," Adelle murmured, her eyes glowing warmly.

Greaves looked from her to her father. "So she believes in me and you do not," he said to Vigil. "But it may be you're not entirely sure—and from the looks she gives me, it may be she isn't, either." He grinned crookedly. "Man may have climbed, but I assure you he hasn't changed."

He smiled at the looks on both their faces. Divinity was new to him, but humanity was not. If these two had thought perhaps they had some dull-witted barbarian here—the one for his faith in his faithlessness, the other for her pleasures—it had been time their error was corrected.

"Old man, god or not I have been called out... whether it pleases you or not. And I won't willingly lay me down to sleep again until I think it's time. So you had better tell me what all this is about, or I will blunder around and perhaps break something you're fond of."

Adelle laughed.

Vigil swung his arm sharply toward her. “This—this would-be courtesan was once Mayron’s great love, when he was First of us all. Because he could find nothing to conquer for her in all the Universe, he began dabbling beyond it for a worthy prize. And he found it. Oh, he found it, didn’t he, my child?”

“Be careful, Father,” Adelle spat. “The worshippers follow *me* now that I’ve wakened him as promised, and you—”

“Quiet,” Greaves said mildly. “He was telling me something.”

“That I was,” Vigil said angrily, while his daughter’s look at Greaves was the least sure it had ever been, “and for all the need you have of it, I might as well not. But if I may say it once and get it said, I can then go to my meal and the two of you will be free to amuse yourselves. Mayron discovered the Shadows, when his machines touched some continuum beyond this one, and the Shadows ate him. But like the fox that lost his tail in the trap and then cozened other foxes with the lie that it was better so and fashionable besides, Mayron made a virtue of his slavery. Those who give themselves up to the Shadows never rest and never hunger. They know no barrier. And no love. No true joy. No noble sorrow. An untailed fox is safe from catching by the tail. A Shadow has no spirit, no humanity, no—soul. But there are always dunderheads. Mayron has them, and down in that city of his down there—” the old man waved a hand at the horizon, but all Greaves could see from where he stood were the glowing tops of what he took to be three fitfully active volcanoes—“he has a city full of dunderheaded shadows who go to some temple he has built and enter the Shadow chamber to be changed. The admission is easily gained; the price of freedom from human care is humanity.”

“And up here,” Greaves said, “other dunderheads come to gain what in exchange for what?”

“Gain at least some sort of affirmation at the cost of remaining men!” the old man growled. “If they are simple, at

least they are human! And even an intelligent man can see the value in what is embodied here.”

“As witness yourself. Yes.”

“I didn’t want to wake you! We know enough so you could have been awakened centuries ago. But to what purpose? To turn another hooligan loose to upset civilization, and lose the symbol of that precious thing? When Man himself can rescue himself? But, no, *this* one, this superstition-ridden tramp I wish I’d strangled in her cradle—*she* stirred the worshippers up, she arranged the combat between yourself and Mayron, she—”

“When and where?”

“What?”

“This fight Mayron and you have both spoken of.”

“Tomorrow at noon. In the city. But there’s no need for it. Tomorrow Mayron dies, and the other Shadows die. You can watch or not—as long as you stay out of the way.”

Greaves looked at Adalie. “Your daughter, Vigil, does not look much impressed.”

“Impressed! Impressed!” The old man was very nearly dancing with rage. “I’ll *show* you! Come with me.” Vigil turned without looking back and pattered rapidly down the steps of the dais, his calloused feet slapping indignantly on the time-buffed stones.

Greaves frowned after him. Then he jerked his head to Adalie. “Come on,” he said and they, too, walked quickly down the length of the court of the conquered monsters. And for the first time since their creation the pillared gargoyles did not have to bear the sight of Man.

The scent of Adalie’s fragrance was in Greaves nostrils again as they followed the old man through the temple, past the altar where the eternal flame burned bright enough to sting. He said nothing to her. She volunteered no words of her own.

But she walked close enough to brush his thigh with hers. Greaves smiled appreciatively.

Vigil led them to a small chamber in one wing of the temple. He flung open the door with a clatter of bolts in a concealed lock, and pointed inside. "Look—the two of you. It's not just Mayron who can dabble with machines. For every clever man, there is another just as clever."

A gun of green metal was mounted on a pedestal in the center of the chamber. Slim and graceful as a wading bird with one extended leg, it poised atop its mount and sang quietly of power and intent to kill. The friezed walls of the chamber hummed in harmonic response to the idle melody of the gun. Greaves felt his hackles rising unreasonably, and he very nearly growled with outrage at the sight of it.

"Tomorrow at noon," Vigil said in a high, triumphant voice, "the weapon will be swung to point through that window and down upon Mayron's city. And when it is done, there will not be a single Shadow alive down there."

Greaves walked to the window in the chamber's far wall and looked down. But it was dark below; nothing to mark the outlines of a city as cities had been in the time he remembered. The temple apparently stood atop a high hill, with the city in a great valley at its foot, but again all Greaves could see were three glowing mountaintops across the way, and, beyond them, the night sky.

Then suddenly one of the volcanos flared for an instant, and the few overhead clouds reflected redly down into the valley.

Greaves caught his breath. The city had emerged black and immense, extending for miles, its lightless towers like the spine-bones of a beast half-eaten and rotting in a tidal pool. Then the light was gone, and once again there was nothing visible down there—if the undead beast had chosen to bestir itself and stealthily move on some errand of the night, no one standing here could have known until it was too late.

“So that’s the city of the Shadows,” Greaves said.

“The city that was once the First City of Man,” Vigil said bitterly. “That Mayron has made into an outpost of Hell. Where no man dares live; where they say that those with Shadows, once they were in sufficient number, dragged women and children into the Chamber of Shadows so that their men, heartbroken, joined them when their Shadow-children returned to plead with them.”

“And this gun of yours is going to do what to them?” he asked.

“Kill them.”

“I know that. How?” Greaves stared at the old man through narrowing eyes.

“A beam of power, made of the stuff that spins within all things—the pure force of this continuum.”

“You mean this thing is some kind of particle emitter—an electron or photon gun?”

“Our science need not concern itself with crudities like names, barbarian. This gun was made as a song or a poem is made—in the mind of a man who dreams weapons where another man might dream bridges... and when the gun finds its fruition, tomorrow when Mayron expects no mightier enemy than you, then the beam will sweep that city, and when it stops Mayron’s city will be a tomb for empty skins. And Man will build another First City, and those who fled shall have a place again, and—”

“Who built—who *dreamed*—this piece of ironmongery?” Greaves growled. “Who was the poet—you?”

“Yes! Why not? Do you think because I am an old man—”

“A heedlessly spiteful one who hasn’t stopped to think.”

“Stopped to think! *Look!*” Vigil seized the torch at the doorway and lifted it high. “Did you think I wasn’t sure? That the weapon has not been tested?”

Now Greaves could see why the gun sang rather than rested in quiet patience. A Shadow hung against the far wall, supported by its outstretched arms, its hands sunken wrist-deep in the stone. And though it jerked its legs and struggled feebly to be free, the hands remained trapped. Under the sound of the idling gun, he could distinguish a quiet, thin, whimpering.

Adelie laughed softly to herself.

Vigil crowed: "He cannot move—what little strength remains to him is needed for bare existence... if I were to touch that control—

"The weapon is at its lowest setting—it has incomparably more power than that; it has the power of all the Universe in it—and look what it can do when it is barely tapped in to its source of power!"

Greaves rumbled in his throat. Suddenly the gun's song was more than he could stand. He barely seemed to move, but Vigil had time to shout, the outraged cry beginning to echo in the chamber when suddenly there came the snap of rending metal, and a choked stammer from the gun. And then Greaves had the gun in his hands, completely torn from its pedestal. He threw it out into the night in a bright flash of fire that bathed them all in a thunderclap of light. Greaves stared after it, his teeth bared, the horrid sound of his hatred still rumbling within him. When that had dwindled, leaving him with his heavy chest heaving for air, the trapped Shadow had vanished, no doubt to tell Mayron that Humanity's godling had gone insane.

Adelie was very pale. Vigil was trying to speak.

And that from the old man was enough to bring back the first scarlet edge of the fury he had turned on the gun.

"Close your mouth!" Greaves commanded him. "I have to go fight Mayron tomorrow, and I don't want another word out of you. Go find something useless to do. Adelie, I want a bath, some food and drink. Right now!"

IV

During the night, he asked Adelle: "I'm supposed to fight him with my hands, is that it? Or with simple weapons of some kind? And this will prove to the worshippers all over the Universe or to the Shadows that either my or Mayron's way of life is right?"

"Yes," she said. "And you *are* very strong. I'm sure you will win. I was sure when I suggested it to Mayron. He's so completely confident—I knew I could trick him into it."

Later, he asked her: "Tell me—was there a famous weapon poet in First City?" And he took her hand, not letting go of it. When she asked him, once, hesitantly, why he had broken the gun, he answered honestly: "Because it seemed hateful." And other than that, they said very little to each other during that night, and whatever they did say had about as much truth in it as all the things they had said or he had been told from the first moment of his awakening. He did not sleep. For one thing, he felt no need of it. For another, he was frightened. He did not want to be a Shadow....

In the morning he had forgotten fear. Steps led from the temple to a pathway that wound down toward the city. He stood for a moment at their head, with the altar burning behind him, and then stepped out into the morning, with Adelle and Vigil following.

There were people waiting out there. They lined the path, murmuring among themselves. As he strode along they fell in behind him, leaving behind the temporary shelters they had put up when they fled from the city and took refuge here.

"Sheep," Vigil snorted as he padded through the dust beside Greaves. "All right, *let* them see you brought down. I'll make another gun—if your stupidity hasn't robbed me of the time I need—and then they'll see...."

“I’m sure that if I lose today, Mayron will give you all the time you need. Maybe he’ll even send that same Shadow poet back to you with whatever story you’ll believe this time.”

“What—?” Vigil stammered.

“What did he tell you? That he would create the gun for you because he hated the Shadows, even though he was a Shadow? Did he tell you how he remembered how fine it was to be a man? Is *that* the story you believed? You simple, credulous murderer! And you repaid him by testing it on him. As he well suspected you might. It’s not only humans who can be brave. Or sacrifice themselves for the ferocity of their race. Or were you too busy taking Humanity’s name in vain to ever consider that? *You* never dreamed that gun. Not you—you may be foolish, but you don’t hate this Universe.”

Vigil was blinking at him. “What—?”

Adelie laughed. “Last night, father. He asked me about weapon poets. There’s no use trying to lie out of it.”

Greaves smiled at her. “That’s right. I asked you, and from that moment on you knew I was cleverer than Mayron thinks. But you never got away to tell him that, did you? You know,” he said thoughtfully, “you’d better hope I win today. Mayron won’t be too fond of you if I give him any more shocks.”

Adelie grinned. “I thought of that. But if you win, he dies. And if you die...?”

“You will have had your glory anyway? You will have engineered the battle of the gods, and dabbled in other pleasures, too?” Greaves was still smiling, but Adelie’s eyes grew wider. “Maybe it’ll be that simple, Adelie. But who can tell the minds of gods, hmm?”

And so David Greaves strode into the city of Shadows, followed by a fearful multitude and two badly shaken people. He walked down a broad avenue at whose end something black bulked and glimmered, while things with

black-filled eyes stood watching thin-lipped. And as he walked he showed none of his fear.

He stopped at the end of the avenue, with the tall towers looming over him, and stood facing the Temple of Shadows. There was no sign of life in the square black opening that served as a door for the featureless stone block, dark but not as dark as a Shadow.

He threw back his head and called: "Mayron!"

The worshippers huddled around him. Vigil, like them, was throwing anxious looks over his shoulders as the city's Shadows crowded closer.

Adelie murmured: "There he is."

And he was, trotting lightly down the steps, smiling. He wore his human skin as naturally as if it were more than a cloak, and Greaves had to look hard to see that when he smiled his lips stretched but no teeth showed.

"Well, Man in all your pride. Are you ready?"

"Ready as any man. How do you propose to go about this?"

"Adelie didn't tell you?"

"She told me as much as I asked. I didn't ask much. Could you suggest any way I could have refused the conditions, no matter what they are? That loses the fight right there. Wasn't I supposed to understand that? Do you think politics is a recent invention?"

"Fierce, fierce," Mayron murmured. "Well spoken." He chuckled. "When I was a man, I would have liked you."

"Get to the business, Mayron."

The Shadow held up his hand. "Not so fast. Perhaps we can arrive at some—"

"Arrive at nothing. Put up or shut up. Vigil no longer has that monstrous gun and there's no point in this for you today. But there is for *me*, and you don't have much time to

realize that.” He glowered at the Shadow, feeling the rage, feeling the onrush of the bright white exaltation when the body moves too fast for the brain to speak, when what directs the body is the reflex founded on the silent knowledge of the brain’s deep layers, where the learning has no words.

Mayron frowned. His head was cocked to one side. If he had had eyes, he would have been peering at Greaves’ face. But he said nothing; he had lost the moment, and now Greaves used it.

“You scum,” Greaves said, his voice booming through the Temple square for all the Shadows to hear. “A weapon that drains the power of this continuum! You leech—you would have had that doddering old man put all my stars out!”

And now the moment was at its peak, and Greaves screamed with rage, so that the faces of the towers were turned into sounding boards and the shout crackled in the air like thunder. He jumped forward, one sweeping arm tossing Mayron out of his way and flailing for balance, while Greaves sprang into the Temple and charged the Chamber of Shadows.

And now the fear—the great devouring fear that came like fangs in his belly but did not stop him. Now the fear as he burst through the acolytes and into the black, light-shot sphere that quivered at the focus of Mayron’s machine. And he stood there, feeling the suck not of one voracious universe but many—all the universes that had eaten the overcurious Mayron and sent back a Judas goat in his skin to conquer what belonged to Man. Feeling the icy cold, and the energy-hunger that could suck Man’s Universe dry and still leave a hunger immeasurable.

But the rage—the rage that came to him, that came to the god uncounted generations of men had made while David

Greaves lay sleeping but his deepest mind lay awake, feeling, feeling the faith, knowing the splendor of what Man had done—The rage that could make a god, that could give a creature like David Greaves the power to create, to dream a man—to make a David Greaves who would lie waiting, ready to become a god....

That rage went forth.

And in parallel continuums of life unimaginable, the dawn of Apocalypse burst upon suns unnameable and worlds unheard-of—upon all the universes which were the true Shadows. The god who was David Greaves again, when the rage had passed—that image which Man himself had made stood blazing his fury in the Chamber of Shadows, and the Universe of Man was free and safe. But in the places of the Shadows there was no hope, no joy, no place of refuge. Mankind was come forth, and galaxies were dying.

One last snap of the fangs—one moment when the death-spurred Shadows almost had their greatest prize of all—and then it was over. Greaves turned and strode out of the blasted Chamber, and the acolytes cowered, covering their eyes, not yet realizing that once more they had eyes.

David Greaves appeared on the temple steps, and began walking slowly down, his legs shaking with exhaustion. Adelle watched him coming toward her. Around her, Shadows that had once been men were men again, but at her feet Mayron lay without his skin, and though her father had fled, she did not dare go without learning what the look on David Greaves' face meant for her.



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